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‘We’re still together’: a biographical study of sibling relationships in later life

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Abstract

My thesis explores the nature of older adults' sibling relationships, which are best appreciated from a life-course perspective due to their enduring nature. Despite recognition that sibling relationships are important for emotional support and reminiscence in later life, little research considers the influence of past context. With the aim of exploring the importance of sibling relationships in later life, I conducted individual biographical interviews, in person or via telephone/Skype, with 35 adults (20 women and 15 men) from eleven sibling groups who included at least one sibling aged 70 or over. Participants were recruited via local radio and newsletters, and forums aimed at older adults. Sibling groups are diverse in size, gender balance, geographical dispersion, marital and parental status, education, and family culture. What participants do with, or for, their siblings currently, as well as the influence of life-course events and gender, was explored using grounded theory and life-course perspectives.

Analysis reveals that older adults' sibling relationships are complex, nuanced and flexible, and that they gain importance in later life. Key findings include that socio-emotional support can be long-lasting; practical support, once routine, can be overlooked; physical illness and the loss of a spouse mobilises sibling support in later life; reciprocity and emotional gain received from providing support, contribute to supportive behaviour; and having more time following retirement, and realising that the years left together are diminishing, facilitates greater appreciation of siblings, with whom everyday conversation is valued as much as reminiscing. Although barriers to face-to-face contact arise in later life, technological advances facilitate better connections at a distance. Family culture, sibling group structure and life-course events influenced the nature of time spent with siblings earlier in life, and the high levels of trust placed in siblings, their shared biological heritage and their family links make them unique, irreplaceable relationships.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

My thesis explores the nature of older adults' sibling relationships, which are best appreciated from a life-course perspective due to their uniquely enduring nature (White, 2001). As I explain in Chapter Three, the impact of demographic changes on family structures such as increased life expectancy and reductions in fertility (Phillipson, 2013) makes older adults' sibling relationships pertinent relationships to explore. Longer life expectancy increases shared time within generations, whilst lower fertility rates reduce the number of family members within generations. Both these factors may foster intense sibling bonds (Bank and Kahn, 1997). Moreover, the life-long nature of sibling relationships, and siblings' tendency to share common history and lived experiences, make exploring older adults' sibling relationships an important research area.

The contribution that family relationships make to individuals' wellbeing and support in old age, particularly in response to life-course events such as widowhood or ill-health, has long been recognised (e.g. Hooyman and Kiyak, 1991; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2014). However, as discussed in Chapter Two, despite this contribution, sibling relationships receive less research attention than other family relationships (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). Although there is some evidence that sibling relationships take on new meaning in old age because of their importance in emotional support, reminiscence, and life review (Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987), as I outline in Chapter Three, research into older adults' sibling relationships is a gap within the field of Social Gerontology. Because sibling relationships are rarely explored in family context, I aim to facilitate understanding of the importance of the life-time sibling tie in the lives of older adults by exploring the influence of past events, experiences and linked lives. My reasons for doing so are both academic and personal as I discuss below, before providing an outline of each chapter of this thesis.

1.1 My interest in studying sibling relationships in later life

The opportunity to explore sibling relationships in later life results from a combination of personal interest and a desire to utilise and enhance research skills gained during my career to date. Although I found changing disciplines challenging, it was also rewarding, and has enabled me to develop a broader range of research skills and employ research approaches which I have not adopted before. Having originally graduated from Keele University in 1991 with a 2:1 in Biological Sciences, I embarked on a career in Health Services Research where my involvement in a variety of research projects enabled me to utilise training I had received in Epidemiology, Statistics and Quantitative Research. My return to Keele in 2000 enabled me to contribute to the Department of Primary Care Sciences' portfolio of arthritis research projects, before moving on in 2006 to manage Keele's National Pathology Benchmarking Service.

As pointed out by Merrill and West (2009), the process of choosing a research topic is not an impartial one. Therefore, I provide a brief autobiographical account in order to explain how my story interweaves with that of my study participants. Following the arrival of my youngest son in 2010 I underwent several medical procedures over the coming months and found myself struggling to recover whilst also juggling the needs of an energetic toddler and an unwell infant, whose illness, eventually diagnosed as severe Asthma, disrupted my sleep. Additionally, the loss of a valued and inspirational colleague to cancer led me to re-appraise my life. Whilst embarking on a career break, two sets of circumstances stimulated my interest in exploring sibling relationships.

First, my sons' sibling relationship was developing beautifully. I reflected on why they are so well suited. The age-gap? Being brothers? Their personalities? My parenting? I wondered whether their closeness would endure and what might influence how it evolves. Despite different personalities, physical appearance and temperament, they share

understanding, biological heritage and family context. Close age spacing has resulted in shared friends, interests, experiences, companionship and mutual support with a range of activities from climbing trees and inventing games to learning life skills. While my older son finds comfort in the presence of his calmer, steadier brother, my younger son is entertained by his lively, enthusiastic brother.

Second, my new world of pre-school children's activities put me in touch with older people, because it was comprised mainly of grandparents. They expressed dissatisfaction with the adult children they saw too briefly when handing over grandchildren. Some who were simultaneously caring for an ageing parent felt under pressure, juggling commitments whilst trying not to make their adult children, who were busy working, feel guilty or unsupported. Through our informal conversations I realised that siblings still had a role to play. They ran errands, shared grandparenting duties, and shared the care of ageing parents between them. They were confidants and friends during difficult times such as widowhood, loss of an adult child, and loss of parents. As my interest in sibling relationships evolved, one of my friends was devastated by the loss of her brother. Although I had always considered the childhood sibling relationship to be of great value, my perspective widened to consider whether siblings play an equally important role in later life for some people.

1.2 Reflections on my experience of sibling relationships

My account above outlines *why* I feel compelled to research the sibling relationship. In this section I reflect on the effect that my subjectivity plays in the research process. Darawsheh (2014) argues that reflexivity, a method of engaging in continual self-reflection in order to be mindful of your own influence on the research process, is increasingly acknowledged as a vehicle for improving academic rigour and quality in qualitative research, as it enhances transparency. In reflecting on my personal perspective of sibling relationships I am conscious that my prior thoughts and assumptions are based on my subjective experience

of having a sibling, which intertwines with the family context in which my younger brother and I were raised. I have been unconsciously experiencing and re-appraising my sibling relationship, and the changes in it, since my brother arrived. As a child, I compared my sibling relationship with my friends' sibling relationships. I was surprised at the hostility that some of my friends felt towards their sibling(s) and slightly envious and bemused by the close, intimate relationship of my best friend and her twin sister.

I feel that my sibling relationship was influenced by gender earlier in life, as we developed different interests and friendships, and also by our life as army children who periodically moved to unfamiliar places. During times of re-establishment we were close friends, companions and supporters, substituting for the temporary absence of peer relationships. As we formed new friendships, we pulled apart. In the main, our moments of togetherness were spent in the company of our parents, although I do recall us playing together, just the two of us, amicably at home too. Our relationship drifted during our teenage years as we pursued different interests in the company of different sets of friends.

We both left home at the same time. He joined the Army and I went to University. Thus, geographical separation, divergence and reconnection remain a long-term pattern for us. We were emotionally close during our childhood and early adulthood years. I was concerned about him when he was stationed on active duty, particularly in Iraq. During our early married years, our relationship inevitably changed into a relationship between two couples. In 2012 our relationship became distant. We are both busy with parenthood, him with his career, and me with my PhD. However, we have recently reconnected and discussed our shared desire to see more of each other.

My expectations around the role that siblings play in middle age and later life are also influenced by my parents' and grandparents' experiences of their sibling relationships and the cultural norms of the society that we live in. The latter point I explore further in Chapter

Two. As women are often viewed as family kin-keepers, Bracke et al. (2008) suggest that the presence of a strong maternal kin-keeper fosters strong sibling bonds. Reflecting on why this has not been my experience, I conclude that although my maternal grandmother remained proximate to her siblings, her position as the sixth of seven widely spaced siblings, meant that most of her siblings were married and working during her childhood. When her younger sibling was born my grandmother was seven, and her nearest in age older sibling was fourteen and working. Due to her younger brother's poor health my grandmother recalls being the favoured child of an older father who she spent much time with. Because she outlived her siblings by decades, in my living memory the relationship between parent-adult child and grandparent-grandchild was emphasised due to the absence of siblings during the last couple of decades of my grandmother's life. My maternal grandfather was an orphan who died at the age of fifty-two. My mother, the eldest of three siblings, lost her youngest brother in early adulthood and her close in age brother in middle age. I recall her saying when he died, "*all of my family are dead now*". Thus, in my mother's family, siblings are a missing family tie in later life, necessitating an emphasis on vertical ties.

My paternal grandfather was the second youngest of eleven siblings from a close-knit Polish family. His few family members who survived the devastation of the Second World War dispersed. My grandfather was the only one who settled in Britain. I recall poignantly that, having seen little of his last surviving sister in later life, he was overwhelmed by the news of her death when in his eighties. My paternal grandmother, brought up by her grandparents in France after her parents' marriage failed, also experienced disruption in her family ties. She rarely saw her siblings after she emigrated to Britain at the age of sixteen. Thus, my father and his five siblings grew up without experiencing extended family relationships. They sadly lost their much-loved youngest brother in early adulthood. My father's sibling relationships were further disrupted because his older brother emigrated to Australia when my father was in his teens, and then my father became, and has remained, geographically distant to his three sisters as he embarked on an army career in his early twenties. Thus, I

had no opportunity to observe my grandparents' sibling relationships and little opportunity to experience my parents' sibling relationships. Until recently I had the misconception that the greater relationship between siblings occurs in childhood. Despite being a sibling, a parent to siblings, the daughter and granddaughter of siblings, and having friends with siblings, my experience of sibling relationships is narrow. I am ill equipped to understand what it means to be a sister of a sister, a younger sibling, or someone with many siblings, or whose sibling is vulnerable, or who suddenly finds that they have more time for their siblings, and/or realises that they need them. Furthermore, I am not at the same time in life as the participants whose sibling relationships I am studying. My knowledge *a priori* has been shaped by personal experience, observation, conversation, literary and media portrayals, and a cultural/societal view of what sibling relationships should mean. Prior to undertaking my PhD, I was reading parenting guides, biographical and autobiographical works, and the work of journalists and psychologists. Although my children stimulated my interest in researching sibling relationships other observations made me consider them through a wider lens. I applied for a PhD within the Centre of Social Gerontology with the aim of exploring the role of siblings across the life-course and their importance in later life.

1.3 Aims of the study and the research questions I explore

I aim to contribute to the small body of research that considers whether sibling relationships, whose intensity may be emphasised by declining fertility rates and an ageing population, are important in later life. To do this I chose to interview members of sibling groups individually in order to explore the role that they play in each other's lives currently, and across the life-course. I feel that this multiple-perspective approach will gain a more rounded picture of sibling relationships and detailed understanding of how they are re-negotiated over the life-course in response to changing needs. The following research questions, derived from the literature review presented in Chapters Two and Three, guide the study.

RQ1: What is the nature of older people's sibling relationships in later life? What do siblings in late life do with, and for, one another?

RQ2: What have older people's sibling relationships been like over the life-course? What has influenced these relationships? What changes have occurred over the life-course?

RQ3: In what ways do siblings re-negotiate their relationships over the life-course and in later life? What instigates these re-negotiations and how do they go about it?

RQ4: In what ways has gender impacted on sibling relationships over the life-course and now, in later life?

1.4 What the thesis covers

In Chapter Two, which follows this introduction, I consider how scholarly interest in siblings evolved. In Chapter Three I focus on work that examines older adults' sibling relationships. Chapter Four explains how my methodological assumptions influence my research strategies and study design. In Chapter Five I present my methods, namely: study design; data collection; transcribing; coding and analysis. Chapter Six introduces the participating families. In Chapter Seven I present my findings about the current importance of participants' sibling relationship, introduce the idea that sibling relationships are responsive to needs, particularly the loss of key relationships, and identify that some differences are due to gender, a theme that continues in the chapters that follow. Chapter Eight highlights the role of siblings as important providers of support in later life and considers the nature of support. In Chapter Nine I focus on the nature of sibling relationships across the life-course using a biographical approach. Chapter Ten forms my discussion and conclusion in which I outline how my study findings contribute to the field, limitations of my study and considerations for further research.

Chapter Two: Sibling relationships research across the life-course

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I present a synthesis of an extensive body of literature relating to sibling relationships across the life-course which contributes to understanding of *how* and *why* earlier life phases influence the nature of sibling relationships in later life. I feel it is particularly important to consider current thinking about whether the characteristics of sibling relationships in earlier life influence closeness and support in later life. The first section of this chapter provides an outline of my search process and criteria. This is followed by an overview of my literature review. Next, I outline the evolution of sibling research from early studies which focus on sibling status (birth order and gender) effects, to contemporary research which examines dimensions of sibling relationships such as emotional closeness, contact, and support. Having considered how theoretical approaches are applied to sibling relationship research, I also explore sibling relationships in wider context. Finally, I summarise the limitations of sibling research and introduce Chapter Three.

2.1 Search criteria, process, and areas covered by the review

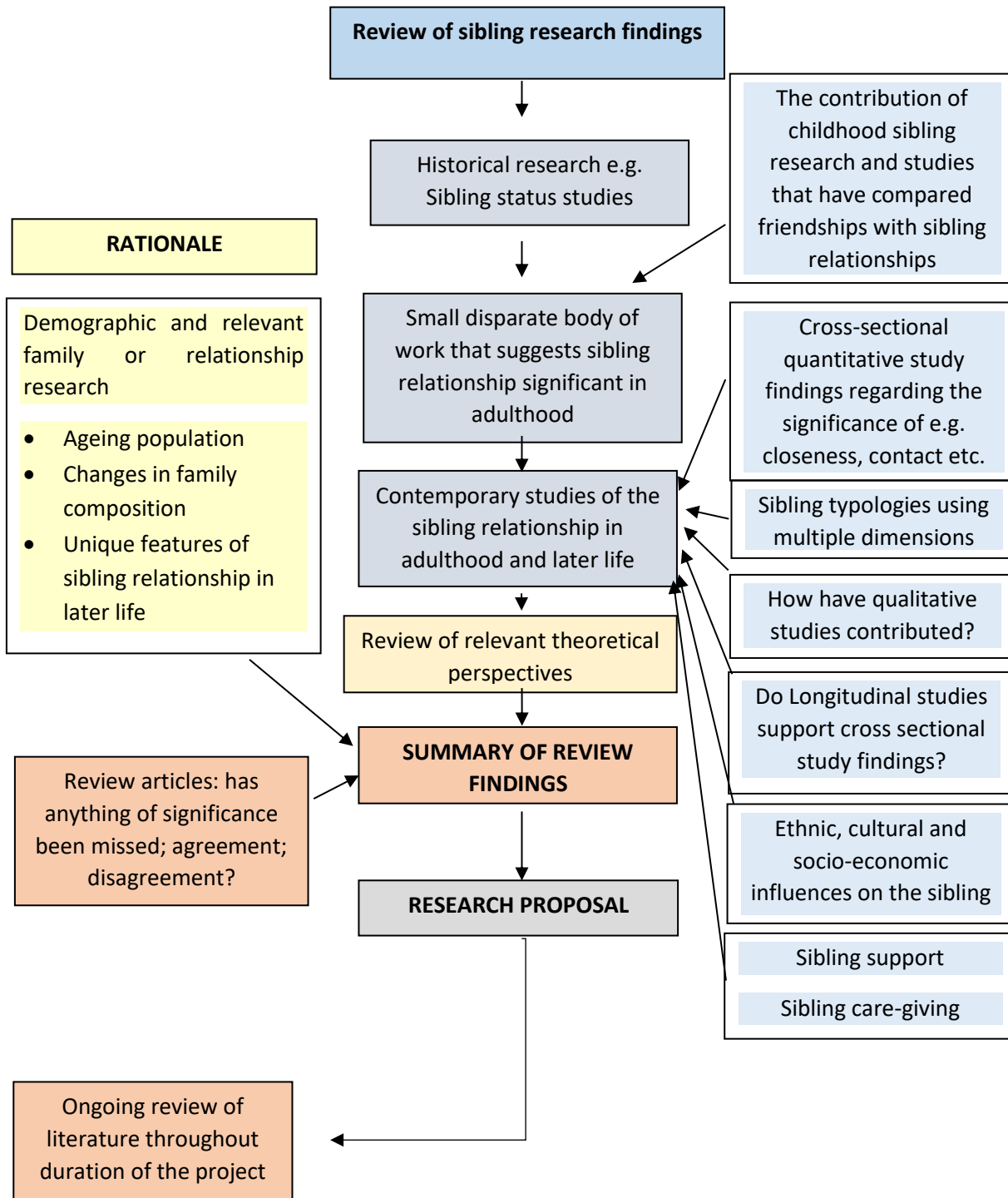
Here I outline my *search process and criteria*, provide an overview of the topics considered in the review, and discuss the findings. The initial search terms “*siblings/sibling relationships*” and “*old age/older adults*” applied via the EBSCO search engine, ISI Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, Sage Publications Database, and Psynchnet, yielded 22 relevant articles. Therefore, synonyms e.g. “*elderly*”, “*older adults*”, “*brothers/sisters*”; broader terms e.g. “*family relationships/family connections*”, “*ties/bonds*”, “*support/care/caring/care giving/networks*”; and terms used by other researchers in the field e.g. “*male/female kinship ties*”, “*collateral*”, “*lateral*” and “*intra-generational*” were used to expand the search. The time period covered by the review was unrestricted. This facilitated understanding of which research areas are: extensive e.g. birth order effects and sibling rivalry; emer

ging e.g. sibling care-giving; little considered e.g. older adult sibling relationships; and consistent e.g. siblings provide emotional support. The diverse and enduring nature of sibling relationships is identified as a unique aspect for consideration. Despite, as discussed below, a consensus view that sibling relationships take on new meaning in later life, only 18 out of the 141 sibling relationship articles I identified initially consider people aged over 60, three of which focus on people aged over 70. During the course of the PhD the review has been periodically revised to account for emerging findings.

I found that the body of literature relating to sibling relationships is disparate. As reflected by the range of journals it is published in, sibling research is of relevance to many disciplines e.g. gerontology, sociology, family sociology, psychology, psychotherapy, demography and epidemiology. Broadening perspective to encompass childhood as well as adulthood research may gain insight into how much the childhood sibling relationship influences the relationship in old age. This may be important in light of the question raised as to whether siblings who are not close in childhood are unlikely to become so as adults (Connidis, 1989). Figure 2.1 presents the *areas covered by my literature review* and the scope of the research methodologies and theoretical perspectives. In brief, historical research, which was followed by contemporary research pertaining to the sibling relationship in childhood, adulthood, and old age, highlights consensus, contradiction, and gaps in the existing knowledge base. A précis of family sociology and social gerontology review papers explores where sibling relationship research sits within the broader context of family sociology and family gerontology. Finally, whether siblings, fictive¹ siblings, or friendships play similar roles, or whether siblings have a unique role was also considered.

¹ Fictive siblings are considered to be siblings, but are not biologically related, or related legally via marriage or adoption but are treated like family members.

Figure 2.1 Outline of Literature Review



2.2 The evolution of sibling research

Within this section I explain how sibling research evolved from its original focus on the effect of birth order on achievement, to considering the effect of birth status on a range of behaviours, before considering the effect that siblings have on each other. Early sibling research was influenced by themes such as power-struggle and rivalry which, according to Sutton Smith and Rosenberg (1970), emerged from fictional works such as Grimm's Fairy Tales. Galton's (1874) attempt to classify the characteristics of scientists by birth order, was a precursor to decades of research into birth order effects. As Sutton Smith and Rosenberg (1970) explain, Adler (1928) proposed that birth order has either an advantageous *or* deleterious *effect* on an individual's development. Later, Harris (1964) attributed "*eminence*" to birth order. The research process initially was subjective and only considered men of high standing in society.

According to Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970), Jones' (1931) criticism of birth order effect research stimulated a decline in birth order studies. However, this was temporary, because following the positivist traditions of the time, a new wave of sibling status research emerged in the 1940s/1950s using experimental designs, which examined the combined effects of birth order and gender on achievement and, later, on behaviour. Little of this research considers *how* the manner in which children are studied might influence their behaviour *out of context*. A series of trials by Levy (1943), who introduced the concept of sibling rivalry, illustrates this point. Three dolls were used to represent a mother, a breastfeeding baby, and the baby's sibling. The children who took part in the experiment were invited by a researcher to demonstrate, using the dolls, what the child would do when they saw their baby sibling for the first time. In the next phase of the experiment the question was asked in a leading manner and, from this artificially created situation, it was concluded that displays of aggressive behaviour (such as biting the baby doll) merely allowed pre-existing aggression towards a child's baby sibling to surface. Whether the children who took

part understood what was expected of them, or conversely behaved in an aggressive way because they felt that was expected, is a matter of debate (Sanders, 2004). Furthermore, it is not possible to say whether the children related the role play situation to themselves, particularly in the absence of parental interaction that might mediate behaviour.

During the late 1950s and 1960s a series of investigations into the effect of sibling status (birth order and gender) on behaviour, interest preferences, or achievement were conducted (see Sutton Smith and Rosenberg, 1970). Groups of white middle-class school children were the focus of this type of research which used questionnaires, intelligence tests, or role play. The main limitation of studies which classify groups of children by sibling status is that they are not observing the wider family context from whence these children came, the influence of parents in real-life situations, or the nature of children's own sibling relationship *in situ*. Nor do they indicate how sibling relationships respond to change. They concentrate on the influence that having a sibling has, rather than the quality of relationships *between* siblings.

However, during the early 1960s a limited amount of work by sociologists suggested that sibling relationships are important components of family systems (e.g. Bossard and Boll, 1960; Cummings and Schneider, 1961; Irish, 1964). In fact, Bossard and Boll (1960) and Cummings and Schneider (1961), highlight the importance of the relationship *between* siblings, although their work did not change the overall focus on sibling status effects, at the time. Using a combination of interviews, questionnaires and family life-history documents, Bossard and Boll (1960) argue that diverse roles and relationships exist between siblings, noting features such as empathy and understanding, as well as attributes such as affection, counselling, leading, protecting, and sometimes parenting.

Interestingly, in the early 1980s, Sutton-Smith refers to the work he carried out in the 1960s as speculation (Lamb and Sutton Smith, 1982). He calls for a shift away from correlating the outcome of psychometric tests with birth order, to examining relationships between siblings. Describing past positive approaches as mechanistic, limited, and lacking context, he recommends:

“Researchers of sibling interaction to do some intensive and long-term participation, observation and interviewing with such samples of families as they can reasonably manage.” (Lamb and Sutton Smith, 1982: 386).

Fifteen years later, sibling researchers Bank and Kahn (1997: 7) similarly observe that:

“Birth-order researchers have not studied sibling relationships in particular life circumstances; and the controversy over whether birth order effects are meaningful has raged on for many years.”

Although at the time Sutton-Smith advocated a shift away from birth order studies sibling research was diversifying, it remains popular. Cicirelli (1995) refers to thousands of birth order studies and Eckstein et al. (2010) describe the 1,065 birth order studies published between 1986 and 1993 as overwhelming. Despite Millner and Calel (2012) demonstrating that the link between birth order and academic achievement is tenuous, using conditional probability, it continues (e.g. Mills and Mooney, 2013; Green and Griffiths, 2014).

In terms of relevance to my research, I conclude that most research attention prior to the 1970s was focused on the effect of sibling status on children’s behaviour and achievement. Limited research which suggests that siblings have an important role to play in each other’s lives (Bossard and Boll, 1960; Cumming and Schneider, 1961) was embryonic and research into adults’ sibling relationships was rare. Childhood studies paid attention to siblings’ roles in developing social skills, their rivalry for parental attention, rather than the relationship *between* siblings (Sutton Smith and Rosenberg, 1970).

I turn my attention next to examining the diverse body of contemporary research which reveals a developing interest in studying sibling relationships at different points in the life-course, using a wide range of research methods. This disparate body of contemporary research moves towards exploring the nature and quality of sibling relationships, in childhood, adulthood and, to a lesser extent, in old age.

2.3 Contemporary research into sibling relationships

Contemporary research explores a number of different dimensions of adult sibling relationships e.g. closeness, contact, support exchange, and rivalry are studied, often in association with structural characteristics such as gender, family size and age, and life-course transitions such as marriage, widowhood and parenthood, and geographical proximity. The findings outlined below have some limitations due to the difficulty of comparing such disparate research findings.

As interest in the relationship *between* siblings grew, Allan (1977) advocated investigating why adult sibling bonds are important, rather than attempting to prove their existence. Contemporary childhood and adulthood sibling research share some common themes. For instance, both bodies of work identify that: sibling relationships are diverse in nature (Gold, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001; Edwards et al., 2006; Nandwana and Katoch, 2009); there is an absence of siblings' own voices in research (Edwards et al., 2006; Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007); and gender is influential (Lee et al., 1990; White and Riedmann, 1992; Neyer, 2002; Edwards et al., 2006). Other researchers also find sibling relationship research an area of neglect in comparison with research into other family relationships (Edwards et al., 2006; Knipscheer and van Tilburg, 2013; Spitze and Trent, 2018).

Below, I identify that research results are sometimes contradictory and confusing, a problem that Cicirelli (1995) experienced when attempting to integrate the various strands of sibling research:

“one soon becomes aware that many separate domains of sibling research exist and that there is little connection between them...” (Cicirelli, 1995: v)

In the following sections I outline those aspects of sibling relationships which have been researched (behavioural, emotional, structural, and cultural) and the associations *between* them. Although I write about the dimensions separately, they are interdependent. In addition, I discuss theoretical approaches that have been applied to research about sibling relationships. Next, I consider where sibling relationship research sits within the wider context of family relationship research, and discuss the implications that more diverse family structures may have on this area of research. I also look at the small body of work which compares friendships to siblingships on the basis that they might function similarly. The least studied area of all - older adults' sibling relationships - will form the focus of Chapter Three.

Behavioural measures such as contact and support highlight the influence of geographical proximity on the relationships between siblings of all ages. Whereas children believe that their sense of connection is facilitated by living and growing up together (Edwards et al., 2006), geographical dispersion plays a role in mediating adult siblings' relationships (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Lee et al., 1990; Blauboer, 2010; Spitze and Trent, 2018). Although the effect of geographical proximity is mediated by other influences such as availability of time (Connidis, 1992) and emotional closeness (Lee et al., 1990), moving nearer to a sibling provides more opportunity for face-to-face contact and for maintaining emotional closeness by building up shared experiences and understanding (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Lee et al., 1990).

Although quantitative and qualitative research findings suggest that ongoing maintenance of closeness between siblings is affected by geographical distance (e.g. Ross and Milgram, 1982; Gold, 1997; Lee et al., 1990; Connidis, 1992) because it affects contact frequency (Spitze and Trent, 2018), examining contact frequency alone does not necessarily provide insight into contact quality (Gold, 1987). In fact, in one study, self-reported levels of intimacy were linked to increased life satisfaction or morale, whereas contact frequency was not found to affect life satisfaction or morale (Wilson et al., 1994). It is worth noting too that since these earlier research studies took place, new technologies enable contact between geographically distant individuals to be more easily maintained.

Support between siblings in adulthood may be influenced by the same factors as contact and closeness e.g. gender, age spacing, geographical proximity, marital status, and family context (Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008). Siblings are often viewed as providers of emotional support and sociability, rather than practical support (Cicirelli, 1995). Although research into the social support networks of adults of *all ages* shows that support is received from siblings (Wellman and Wortley, 1989, 1990), as will be discussed in Chapter Three, research so far suggests that relatively little help from siblings is received by *older adults*.

Despite their potentially supportive contribution, it is not clear what prevents siblings from providing more support than they do (Avioli, 1989). Data from a large US national sample indicates that a sibling would be the first port of call in an emergency for 29% of respondents, and for help in a financial crisis for 15% of respondents (White and Riedmann, 1992). However, actual support exchange between siblings was relatively low (26% reported receiving help and 37% reported giving help). Receiving advice was the most common exchange, followed by help with childcare, then transportation, with giving or receiving money rarer. Cicirelli (1989) found that sibling help centres on psychological

support, transport, and temporary help when ill. In fact, physical ill health was the adverse life event which elicited the most support (defined as practical help, advice, or showing an interest) from siblings in a Dutch study (Voorpostel et al., 2012). The authors used data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study to investigate the association between: past adverse life events (divorce, physical and mental illness, addiction, criminal behaviour, abuse and financial problems); sibling relationship behaviour (contact, giving and receiving support, and conflict); the perceived balance in the relationship (giving and taking); and the perceived quality of the sibling relationship. They found the highest levels of support and contact amongst those who reported no adverse life events. In general, with the exception of physical ill-health, the authors report that the experience of negative life events, rather than eliciting support from siblings, appears to increase tension. The authors concluded that events that are more stigmatised e.g. problems with the law and addiction, are least likely to result in sibling support (Voorpostel et al., 2012). However, as the authors point out, their research is limited by lack of detailed understanding of the timing of events and potentially biased if individuals over-estimate their input, a phenomenon described by research using validated research instruments designed to identify self-reporting bias (Furnham and Dowsett, 1993). Furthermore, it is not possible, for instance, to understand whether another family member, such as a parent, is providing support to an individual experiencing adversity. Also, although this exploratory research examines a range of adverse life events, it does not include widowhood, which elicits sibling support in later life (O'Bryant, 1988).

It may also be possible that some individuals downplay support received, because of a desire to retain their independence. It is noticeable that research into support between siblings tends to either compare the contribution of siblings to other family relationships (Campbell et al., 1999; Lam and Power, 1991), ask about specific types of support exchange over a fixed period of time e.g. in the last month (Spitze and Trent, 2006) or last three months (Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008), or rate the amount of support exchanged e.g.

Neyer (2002) used “never” to “very frequently”. These comparisons unintentionally make sibling support seem inadequate, yet whether support from siblings is needed, wanted, or favourably received during the period researched, is not often subject to enquiry. Researchers also consider emotional measures of sibling relationships, particularly closeness, and negative emotions such as jealousy, and also, feelings of ambivalence towards siblings are reported by researchers (Connidis, 2007), as discussed next.

Emotional measures such as closeness, intimacy, and rivalry, appear to change across the life-course in response to changes in life-course transitions. However, for the main part, the use of these terms is influenced by the research questions rather than participants’ own descriptions of how they feel about their siblings and, crucially, men and women may express affection differently. Also, as discussed earlier, emotional closeness encompasses a range of emotions, which include love and affection.

Research suggests that feelings of emotional closeness between siblings are liable to wax and wane in response to life-course transitions such as leaving home (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992), marriage (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992), parenthood (Connidis, 2007), divorce (Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973) and widowhood (O’Bryant 1988; Scott 1983). Qualitative research study findings suggest that engaging in ongoing shared experiences contributes to the maintenance of closeness (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992; Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007). As discussed further in Chapter Three (page 42), emotional closeness between siblings is reported to increase in old age (e.g. Ross and Milgram, 1982; Gold, 1987), although Connidis (1989;1994) questions whether this is likely for those whose relationship was not close earlier in life. Connidis (1992) reports that shared experiences such as becoming parents, draws siblings closer in middle age. However, this may only apply to siblings who experienced the same life transitions at a similar time in life.

Negative emotions such as conflict, jealousy and rivalry are the focus of debate in relation to childhood sibling relationships, particularly how rivalry is influenced by maternal favouritism (Suitor et al., 2009). Some researchers suggest that the nature of the adult sibling bond is influenced by its character in childhood (Bank and Kahn, 1997), when rivalrous feelings are more frequently observed between same-sex siblings (Sutton Smith and Rosenberg, 1970). Although parental influence on the sibling bond may be long term in nature (Ross and Milgram, 1982), sibling relationships in adulthood are commonly characterised by positive feelings (Pulakos, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001) and rivalry becomes less relevant with age. Some research indicates that rivalry can be constructive, fostering healthy competition between siblings (Cicirelli, 1977; Ross and Milgram, 1982; Bedford et al., 2000).

According to Bank and Kahn (1997), sibling loyalty can exist alongside rivalry and conflict. Moreover, childhood sibling researchers view some degree of ambivalence as normative (Kramer, 2010) and note that observational work in the 1980s by Dunn and Kendrick (1982) describes childhood siblings switching between “*conflict, teasing, threats [...] shared laughter, affection and pride...*” (Kramer, 2010: 81). As I will discuss further in Chapter Three (page 68), conflict, often seen as a normal part of sibling relationships earlier in life, tends to resolve in later life (Gold, 1987).

Structural measures, namely how much family size and composition - particularly gender balance and age spacing - affects sibling relationships, is subject to debate because findings are inconsistent. For example, Lee et al. (1990) find smaller sibling groups more supportive, whereas Connidis (1994) finds larger sibling groups more supportive. However, different methods were employed. Lee et al. (1990) selected one sibling at random for participants to report on and analysed their results according to family size, whereas

Connidis (1994) compared the responses of participants with one sibling to those of participants with more than one sibling. These results are difficult to compare because of different family contexts and methodological approaches. Another way in which sibling relationships have been explored is to distinguish between different types of sibling relationships. For example, Murphy (1992) distinguishes between caretaker, buddy and casual sibling types in her classification of childhood sibling relationships, whereas adult sibling typologies (e.g. Gold, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001) are based on levels of e.g. confiding, closeness, support, and rivalry, rather than roles.

The debate within childhood and adulthood sibling research about the effect of gender differences in sibling relationships is ongoing (Spitze and Trent, 2018), with some consensus and some contradiction. The gendered nature of sibling relationships seems apparent in childhood when confiding talk is a significant practice between sisters, and shared activities cement brothers' and brother-sister relationships (Edwards et al., 2005). However, comparing adult sibling relationships by gender produces confusing results. For example, it is reported that gender differences in relationship maintenance behaviours continue into adulthood as sisters appear to maintain their sibling relationships more (Goodboy et al., 2009). While many researchers report that sister-pairs are closer (e.g. White and Riedmann, 1992; Spitze and Trent, 2006) and are in contact more (Connidis and Campbell, 1995; Lee et al., 1990), some research suggests that same-sex sibling relationships are more positive than relationships between opposite-sex siblings (e.g. Connidis, 1989, 1994; McGhee, 1985). Moreover, a recent study using US Family and Household Survey data finds no evidence to support the suggestion that gender is an indicator of contact and support exchange between adult siblings (Spitze and Trent, 2018).

Those studies which rely on contact frequency to compare men and women's sibling relationships (e.g. Lee et al., 1990) produce results that are difficult to explain and merit further exploration. There is a tendency to report that all brother-brother, sister-sister or brother-sister pairs are similar, and to ignore wider family context (Matthews et al., 1989). For some indicators, the participant's gender appears to be more influential than the gender composition of the sibling pair, and findings such as sisters are in telephone contact five times a month but brothers only three times (Spitze and Trent, 2006), may be over interpreted particularly as contact frequency is explored over a relatively short period of time e.g. the last month, the last three months. Therefore, contact is not a reliable indicator to use to compare relationship quality.

Although men appear to be in contact less with their siblings than women, men do feel deep affection for their siblings (Bank and Kahn, 1997), and even if sister-sister pairs are closer, it does not mean that brothers do not value their siblings. In fact, one study of brother-brother pairs found that half of the brothers described their relationship as close or extremely close (Matthews et al., 1989). Furthermore, men are less represented in sibling relationship research and some researchers are cautious about making gender comparisons because of the larger proportion of females in their studies e.g. Wilson et al. (1994). Knowing more about sister relationships, and characterising them as more significant, diminishes research into brother relationships (Chambers et al. 2009) which is part of a wider issue around "*lack of visibility of men in aging families*" (Bengston et al., 1990: 267 cited in Martin Matthews, 2001). Research into sibling support by gender is also contradictory. Although Campbell et al. (1999) suggest that sibling support is unimportant for men, Johnson (1999) finds otherwise and, as noted above, Spitze and Trent (2018) find that support exchange is unrelated to gender.

Having reviewed behavioural, emotional and structural dimensions of sibling relationships, now I turn my attention to *theoretical perspectives* on sibling relationships.

2.4 Theoretical perspectives

Theoretical perspectives on sibling relationships range from early psychological theories of attachment (Cicirelli, 1989) to approaches which consider siblings within the context of a family system (Campbell et al., 1999), to more recent applications of life-course theory (White 2001) and sociological ambivalence (Connidis and Campbell, 2005; Connidis, 2007), amongst others. Despite criticism regarding the lack of theoretical approaches to the study of sibling relationships (Bedford, 1989; Cicirelli, 1995; Van Volkom, 2006; Whiteman, 2011; Blieszner and Bedford, 2012; Knipscheer and van Tilburg, 2013), or that it is used too descriptively rather than in an interpretive manner (Cicirelli, 1991), sibling relationship research is not devoid of useful theorising. Whiteman (2011), in his review of theoretical approaches to the study of sibling relationships, argues that they are important and that studying them plays a large part in understanding family dynamics despite this being a relatively neglected area of research. He determines that sibling relationships share many features with other family relationships, such as being multidimensional and responsive to changing circumstances. Whiteman (2011) concludes that no one theoretical perspective can account for the developmental, family and group differences that are characteristics of sibling relationships. This supports other suggestions that although theory is needed to explain how sibling connections arise and endure (Cicirelli, 1991), no one theory is dominant (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). As outlined below, two of the earliest theories to be applied to sibling relationships - attachment theory and equity theory - focus on individual relationships, whereas other theories consider family and social context, or how siblings support developmental or life-course needs.

Attachment theory, developed to explain mother-child bonds (Bowlby, 1980), has also been used to explain the *formation* and *endurance* of sibling bonds (Bank and Kahn, 1982). Attachment, or an emotional bond between two people associated with feelings of love and

a desire to be with the other person (Cicirelli, 1989), appears, in the case of siblings, to arise in childhood and remain significant throughout life (Bank and Kahn, 1982; Cicirelli, 1991; Gold, 1987; Ross and Milgram, 1982). Several features of attachment theory can aid understanding of how and why sibling relationships are maintained during adulthood, and why positive sibling relationships are associated with well-being in old age. Namely: the need to remain in contact; the experience of grief upon the loss of a sibling; and the sense of comfort that sibling relationships provide (Cicirelli, 1989). Adult siblings do maintain contact with one another (McGhee, 1985); grieve when a sibling is lost (Moyer, 1992); and affect each other's well-being positively (Cicirelli, 1991). Feelings of attachment towards siblings can be experienced when they are not physically present through recalling fond memories, shared values, and goals (e.g. Bank and Kahn, 1982; Ross and Milgram, 1982). This '*symbolic*' contact (Cicirelli, 1989; 305) can be supplemented by occasional visits and telephone calls. Feeling protective towards an attachment figure is also applicable to sibling relationships (Cicirelli, 1989) and may explain helping and care-giving behaviours between siblings. In old age, the loss of other important relationships and physical decline may make siblings appear vulnerable, and attachment theory may thus explain the tendency for siblings to become closer as they age and put aside old rivalries (Goetting 1986; Gold, 1987; Ross and Milgram, 1982).

So, attachment theory helps explain why sibling bonds established in childhood influence feelings of affection and regard in old age. That sibling relationships in old age are often positive, seems to be due to a strengthening of the attachment bond as parents die, adult children become independent, and health declines. Thus, older adults report feelings of closeness to their siblings more than younger and middle-aged adults, are more likely to view siblings as potential sources of help that can be mobilised in times of crisis, and place importance on the sense that siblings will be there when needed (Bank, 1995). Although rivalry still exists, it is emphasised differently (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Gold, 1989) perhaps because once parents are dead, there is less to compete over. Furthermore, when parents

die, a significant loss of biographical / relationship continuity may be experienced. Although siblings might not replace that, they can offer an important aspect of continuity across the life-course

Bank (1995) views positive sibling relationships as normative, noting, like Gold (1989), that troubled sibling relationships are regretted by older people who may feel a sense of loss. Attachment theory, coupled with a long, shared history, explains why siblings are potential candidates for psychotherapy, which can facilitate them in being drawn back together in later life (Bank, 1995). Weak or absent sibling bonds are rare, and intense sibling bonds develop: when close age spacing or being of the same gender creates greater opportunity for shared experience; or when economic hardship, illness, inadequate parenting skills or abuse, reduce positive parental attention (Bank, 1995). That the association between positive sibling relationships and well-being in old age is related to the degree of attachment between siblings (Cicirelli, 1989), is supported by reports that intimate siblings are the most attached (Gold, 1989) and maintain their relationship(s) more (Goodboy et al., 2009). However, this does not account for individuals who care for a sibling that they feel little attachment to (Barnes, 2012). Sibling attachment research has also been used to explain differences in siblings' relationships with their parents (Van Ljzendoorn et al., 2000; Whiteman, 2011), and applied to twin relationships (Neyer, 2002; Fraley and Tancred, 2012).

Attachment theory also contributes to understanding how *family dynamics* in general, and sibling relationships in particular, are shaped across generations. Donley and Likens (2010) use attachment theory to explore whether particular types of sibling relationships (e.g. calm versus tense) in one generation lead to similar types of sibling relationships in the next generation. Their research expands on intergenerational continuity research on the quality of parent-child relationships across generations to reveal that individuals whose parents experienced difficult sibling relationships experienced similarly difficult sibling relationships

themselves, and that maternal influences were stronger than paternal ones. By considering sibling relationships in a multigenerational research context, Donley and Likens (2010) provide new insights into the influence of family context down the generations. Because each sibling also has parental relationships, each parent-child and sibling-sibling relationship forms part of a larger system of family relationships within which sibling relationships develop and are maintained. Intergenerational relationships theory may provide insight into how parents influence the sibling relationships of their own children. For instance, parents may teach their children how to get along with each other. Parents may also set examples in terms of how they feel and relate to their own siblings, which their children may observe. However, attachment theory may better explain why some individuals whose parents did not maintain strong sibling ties, do form strong sibling bonds despite the absence of a positive role model. Thus, as will be discussed below, taking a life-course and biographical approach to the study of sibling relationships is important in order to understand the influence of past context, particularly family context, on the current nature of participants' sibling relationships.

Equity theory on the other hand, explains that emphasising individuation (Avioli, 1989) and viewing the sibling relationship as egalitarian, makes sibling support difficult to access, because individuals are reluctant to rely on their siblings for fear of seeming weaker when they view themselves as equal. Equity theory has been used to interpret why differential parental treatment of siblings influences the siblings' levels of closeness, confiding and support exchange (Suitor et al., 2006). In fact, research into the effects of differential parental treatment of siblings in adulthood, suggests that it influences closeness, confiding and levels of emotional and instrumental support exchange (Fingerman et al., 2004; Suitor et al., 2006; Suitor and Pillemer, 2007). However, more attention is paid to the likely causes of differential treatment (e.g. gender, birth order) than the consequences. Thus, the question of how and for how long differential treatment influences the quality of siblings' relationships, or whether it remains important once parents are deceased, remains unexplored.

When inequity between adult siblings was explored in the context of care-giving for ageing parents, it was not considered unfair if the reasons for unequal contributions were viewed as legitimate, but caused distress if they were not (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2003 cited by Sung and Lee, 2013). However, negotiating care-giving roles between siblings is a situation which may introduce conflict (Connidis, 2007). In societies where cultural norms which advocate inequity are accepted by all family members it is considered fair, promoting life-long obligatory ties (Sung and Lee, 2013). When inequity between siblings is explored in areas other than care-giving towards parents, there is evidence that adjustments in expectations take place. For instance, Barnes (2012) reports that inequity between siblings is not considered to be unfair when one sibling is disabled. Similarly, when Connidis (2007) examined inequity in material wealth between siblings, she found that sibling relationships are more successfully re-negotiated when less emphasis is placed on the source of inequity. For example, engaging in shared activities that do not highlight different financial circumstances.

Developmental and life-course perspectives predict that sibling relationships are close in childhood; less involved during adulthood; and closer in old age (White, 2001). From a *developmental perspective*, siblings become less important once individuals reach adulthood. Then, in later life, siblings regain relevance when: reminiscence and life review; companionship and emotional support; resolution of sibling rivalry; and providing help, become important development tasks (Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987; Bank, 1995). Potentially, the relevance of differential treatment by parents may fade once parents are dead. In old age, support exchange increases between nearby siblings, and reminiscence with siblings is more satisfying than with other family members (Gold, 1987; White, 2001). However, developmental theory offers weak explanations for individuals who do not follow a normative course of development.

By contrast, *the life-course perspective* (Elder, 1998) considers how individuals change over time, how their transitions and trajectories are linked across family members, and views individuals as shaping their life-course through the choices they make. External factors also shape all family relationships e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic circumstance (Stoller and Campbell Gibson, 2000). For instance, changes in socio-economic status or inequitable care-giving for an older parent, can affect sibling relationships negatively unless siblings are able to negotiate inequity and focus on positive aspects of their relationship (Connidis, 2007).

A life-course approach recognises that in order to understand present relationships, it is important to appreciate past context. Thus, a life-course perspective considers how changes in sibling relationships are shaped by life-course events, and social and cultural context, in order to understand the context within which siblings' lifelong connections are maintained. Leaving home, getting married, having children or establishing careers, reduces siblings' importance (Blauboer, 2010; Connidis, 1992; White, 2001). In the absence or reversal of these transitions (e.g. retirement, widowhood), siblings remain important, or even regain importance (Connidis, 1992).

A life-course perspective also recognises that relationships change in response to changes within wider family and personal networks. Connidis (2001) appeals for the use of a life-course perspective because family life-course events seem to be important in shaping sibling relationships. For instance, siblings may seem important childhood relationships but become distanced as adults during particular life-course transitions e.g. parenthood (White and Riedmann, 1992). However, under some circumstances, siblings remain connected in response to need e.g. when a parent dies in childhood (Mack, 2004) or following widowhood (White 2001). Despite such ebb and flow in sibling relationships, their staying power is apparent when they are viewed in entirety (White, 2001; Chambers et al., 2009).

Some researchers and theorists use *social support theories* to explain changes in sibling relationships over time. For example, family relationships were described by Parsons (1943) as existing within three concentric circles. Siblings - important inner circle members during childhood - move to the outer circle in adulthood to make way for families of procreation (White and Riedmann, 1992). Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) Convoy Model of Social Support suggests that individuals are accompanied throughout life by people with whom social support is exchanged. Although convoy size is fairly stable, one convoy study found a reduction in emotional support for those aged over 75, due to the loss of irreplaceable sibling relationship (Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton, 1988). The convoy model suggests that siblings return to the inner circle under particular circumstances although, as discussed above, Mack's (2004) finding suggests that siblings may remain in the inner circle in response to early parental death.

Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory further aids our understanding of the dual processes of reduced social interaction with age, yet increased feelings of emotional closeness towards particular relationships, especially family (Carstensen, 1991 cited by Stewart et al., 2001). The theory explains how individuals adapt their social networks to maximise social and emotional gain as they adjust to losses and changes in the functioning of relationships with age. Stewart et al. (2001) argue in favour of using socio-emotional selectivity theory, because their data demonstrates that sibling relationships become more positive with age, and negative emotions such as conflict, decline with age. They suggest that decline in conflict results from the loss of other important relationships from early adulthood onwards, which contribute to the sibling relationship becoming increasingly important as life goes on. In addition, *the Hierarchical Compensatory Model* (Cantor, 1979 cited by Connidis, 2007) suggests that although there is an order of preference regarding which relationships best meet older adults' needs, in the absence of a spouse or adult children, siblings become more supportive (Campbell et al., 1999). Alternatively, the *Task Specific Model* (Litwak, 1985) suggests that each relationship provides specific support e.g. siblings are preferred

for reminiscence. However, as suggested by Weiss (1974), if specific types of support are provided by particular relationships, one relationship type may not necessarily compensate for the loss of another. On the other hand, the *Functional Specificity of Relationships Model* (Simons 1983-1984) is flexible and suggests that although different relationships suit particular tasks, under certain circumstances this may be re-negotiated. This is backed by Connidis (1994) who finds that, following widowhood, supportive sibling relationships are negotiated. Thus, support for substitution theories is based on reports of increased sibling support following divorce or widowhood (e.g. O'Bryant, 1988), and between nearby siblings aged over 70 (White, 2001).

Over the last two decades, *The Intergenerational Solidarity Paradigm* which describes sentiments, behaviours, attitudes, values and structural arrangements in parent-adult child relationships, emerged as a major theory (Bengston et al., 1996; Allen et al., 2000; Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). However, this theory has not been used to explain or describe older adults' relationships with collateral kin such as siblings and cousins. The recognition that family relationships are often ambivalent because they evoke both warm and antagonistic feelings (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998), became a significant focus in intergenerational family research. Originally, *sociological ambivalence* was thought to compete with the intergenerational solidarity theory which uses six components: contact, emotional closeness, consensus, instrumental support and resource sharing, normative obligation, and opportunity structures for family interaction, to examine the nature and quality of intergenerational relationships. However, when conflict is recognised as an ordinary feature of family relationships it is possible to integrate the two approaches (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). One study which found that adult sibling ties are characterised by ambivalence supports this approach (Connidis, 2007). Feelings of ambivalence towards siblings have been linked to parental, particularly maternal, favouritism and maternal favouritism that occurs earlier in life has been found to be a better

predictor of tension between middle aged siblings than their current perceptions about maternal favouritism (Suitor et al., 2009). This finds support from a small amount of research that finds good sibling relationships are more likely to exist in old age if both siblings recall fair and equal childhood treatment from their parents (Connidis, 2007; Suitor et al., 2009).

With respect to the dimensions of inequality considered earlier, theoretical explanations regarding the *influence of gender* on the sibling relationship appear to stem from gendered expectations about kin-keeping roles, and the principles of femaleness and sex commonality (Spitze and Trent, 2006). In Western societies, traditional kin-keeping roles promote sister-sister relationships, whereas in Asian societies, traditional norms foster supportive brother-brother relationships (Lu, 2007; Sung and Lee, 2013). Although no major theoretical explanations are offered to date, principles are used by researchers to interpret gender related findings. *The femaleness principle*, that the presence of a woman in a relationship determines the closeness of the relationship (Akiyama et al., 1996), is supported by some findings from research studies in Western societies that sister-sister pairs are closest (White and Riedmann, 1992; Spitze and Trent, 2006) and have more contact (Lee et al., 1990; Connidis and Campbell, 1995). However, the work of Johnson, (1999), as will be discussed in Chapter Three, supports the *sex commonality principle* that same-sex siblings form closer ties.

In concluding this section, it is important to note that not every theory that has been applied to the study of siblings is included above. Some theories, of less relevance to older adult sibling relationships e.g. family system theory, are not discussed above, but have been considered. Having presented the main theories that were of most relevance to my study, I now consider the influence of wider context on sibling relationships.

2.5 Sibling relationships in context

Research into the influence of *race, culture and socio-economic circumstances* on family relationships (Martin Matthews, 2001), including siblings (Johnson, 1999; Van Volkom, 2006), appears to be a notable gap in the literature. Like Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) who found only three articles that examined *race and ethnicity* in later life, I found that the majority of studies identified through my searches involve predominantly White participants from Europe, America, Canada, or Australia, although it should be noted that my search only identifies articles that are written in English. I did review three studies from non-Western societies which come from India (Nandwana and Katoch 2009), China (Lu, 2007), and Korea (Sung and Lee, 2013), and some studies which use race as a control variable (e.g. White and Riedmann, 1992). White and Riedmann's study suggests that race may influence sibling relationships because they find that African Americans have closer sibling ties than Caucasians, Mexican or Asian Americans. However, the influence of other related factors, such as family size, and socio-economic circumstances is difficult to gauge.

Two studies from non-Western cultures reveal that obligatory, hierarchical cultural norms which place greater family responsibility onto sons, foster closer brother-brother relationships, whereas egalitarian norms of a more voluntary nature foster closer sister-sister ties (Lu, 2007; Sung and Lee, 2013). Furthermore, in societies where cultural norms foster obligatory sibling relationships, siblings assume life-long importance (Cicirelli, 1995; Lu, 2007; Sung and Lee, 2013). However, because research into sibling relationships from countries outside of Europe, America, and Canada is rare, such results should be treated with caution and not over interpreted, particularly because, as Sung and Lee's (2013) study highlights, cultural influences are subject to change. In support of this, US research findings predict that the intense sibling bonds reported amongst immigrant communities change as immigrant families become assimilated into the dominant culture (Cicirelli, 1995). However, the extent to which this occurs is likely to vary, as is the time period over which assimilation

and integration occur. Also, differences between ethnic groups may be circumstantial e.g. due to geographical or socio-economic factors (Riedmann and White, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007), which might be slow to change. Overall, in multi-cultural societies like Britain and America, research into sibling relationships within ethnic minority families is rare, despite diversity within ethnic groups in terms of cultural and religious beliefs, family size and structure, and work ethics, which combine to affect the nature of sibling relationships.

In addition, the small amount of existing research into the effect of *social class* on sibling relationships produces contradictory results. Some researchers report that working-class siblings share more instrumental support (Avioli, 1989; White and Riedmann, 1992) whereas those of higher education tend to move further away and contact each other less (White, 2001). However, Knipscheer and van Tilburg's study from the Netherlands (2013) finds support exchange to be higher among better educated siblings.

This also relates to *diversity in family composition*. As diversity increases, defining family relationships by "*biology, adoption, marriage, and, in some societies, social designation*" (Bedford and Blieszner, 1997: 526) is an approach that encourages researchers to ask who individuals consider to be family (Allen et al., 2000; Edwards et al., 2006). This issue of "who is a sibling", when approached flexibly, reveals biologically and socially constructed interpretations in children's narratives because although children distinguish family from friends (Edwards et al., 2006), some omit a biological sibling from their inner circle due to lack of contact or closeness. Likewise, married individuals sometimes omit members of their family of origin when defining "*family*" because they emphasise their family of procreation (Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007). More diverse and flexible family practices mean that the term sibling encompasses a range of ties (Cicirelli, 1995; Edwards et al., 2006), as summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Types of siblings by shared biology, family values and legal status (after Elgar and Head, 1999)

Type of siblings	Common Genes	Common History, Family Values, and Culture	Common Legal Status
Full Siblings brought up together	√	√	√
Full Siblings brought up apart/separated during childhood	√	Some	√
Full Siblings, placed away from one another at birth	√	No	√ (Unless adopted)
Half Siblings, brought up together	Some	√	No
Half Siblings, brought up apart/separated during childhood	Some	Some	No
Half Siblings, brought up by one parent, never lived with half siblings	Some	No	No
Adopted children	No	Some	√
Step – Siblings	No	Some	No
Foster children	No	Some	No
Fictive siblings	No	Some	No

Diversity creates methodological and theoretical issues for investigators (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). Because sibling relationship research focuses largely on full biological siblings, the perspective of siblings for whom “*length of shared life*” (Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007: 57) is more significant than genetic heritage remains under-explored. Step-sibling relationships are rarely researched, perhaps because they form at different stages of children’s (and adult’s) lives in a diverse range of circumstances e.g. divorce, re-marriage and serial partnership, so lack some of the shared history common to full siblings. Individuals who have step-siblings may also have full biological siblings that they are closer in age to and feel more connected to. Step-siblings who do not feel that they belong to the same family are less likely to develop sibling ties (Allan et al., 2011).

As well as diversity described above in terms of genetic heritage and upbringing, different types of sibling relationships are described in both Western (Gold, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001) and non-Western cultures (Nandwana and Katoch, 2009; Sung and Lee, 2013). Despite increasing diversity sibling relationships are important for most people, with siblings

rarely discontinuing their connection (Bank, 1995) and the majority of sibling relationships are found to be positive (Gold, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001; Nandwana and Katoch, 2009).

Another question raised in the literature is whether *friendships can function like sibling relationships*. Throughout the literature, sibling relationships in Western societies are described as peer-like, voluntary and egalitarian (e.g. Cicirelli, 1995; Bank and Kahn, 1997; Blieszner and Bedford, 2012). That this ignores the relationships of siblings who are more widely spaced is discussed further in Chapter Nine (pages 202-203). It is, however, this view of siblings as having peer-like and egalitarian relationships which has stimulated research into the similarities and differences between siblings and friendships in childhood (Edwards et al., 2006), and adulthood (Connidis 1989; Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe, 2007) although there is little research evidence about whether the two types of relationship provide similar levels of support to each other (Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe, 2007). Although both relationships often occur between age-peers and may potentially last a life time, friendships are voluntary, based on common interests, whereas sibling relationships, like other family relationships, are ascribed. Furthermore, friendships are characterised more strongly by reciprocity, siblings by family norms, and both relationships vary (Stewart et al., 2001). Family context creates a sense of responsibility towards siblings which continues in the face of conflict, whereas friendships are maintained by positive participation (Allan, 2008). More friends (80%) are of the same gender than siblings (50%) (Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe, 2007), although Allan (2008) reports that opposite-gender friendships are more common within younger cohorts.

Although Edwards et al. (2012) argue that moving away from traditional views of 'the family' provides researchers with a more flexible approach to the study of diverse family forms, their view is not substantiated by evidence that friendships operate in the same way as family ties. In fact, friendships, central during particular phases of the life-course e.g. on leaving home, do not compensate for family ties, operating differently with regard to

solidarity, reciprocity, equality and support exchange (Allan, 2008). Despite the potential for non-kin ties to become more commonplace within older adults' social networks in the future, most older adults enjoy the company of family (Chambers et al., 2009), and research suggest that despite some overlap between family and friendship domains they remain distinct for both children (Edwards et al., 2006) and adults (Connidis, 1989; Allan, 2008). Family relationships are also more continuous than friendships, as friendships may not be kept up when circumstances alter. However, as discussed further below, it is important to consider how increasing diversity in family composition relates to sibling relationships.

2.6 Why has there been a relative inattention to sibling relationships?

Because, as discussed earlier, sibling relationships do not exist in isolation but are shaped by experiences, interactions, life-course events, societal and family norms, and structural changes (Chambers et al., 2009), it is important to examine the wider context. This includes social and economic changes, the adoption of more flexible family structures, the role of fictive siblings and friendships, and the impact of demographic changes on older individuals' sibling relationships. As the analyses by Allen et al. (2000) and Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) show, taking this wider perspective reveals that sibling relationships are less considered than other family relationships within the literature on family sociology and family gerontology (see Table 2.2, below).

This observation is confirmed by other researchers who also consider sibling relationships to be neglected or forgotten family ties (Whiteman, 2011; Blieszner and Bedford, 2012). In order to consider why this might be the case, trends in research into family and social gerontology *per se* were examined. According to Allen et al. (2000), during the 1990s a greater sensitivity to family context and the diverse nature of families arose, marking a shift towards considering family context rather than focussing on individuals. Allen et al. (2000) argue that this has helped researchers gain a better understanding of family care-giving,

social support, parent-child relationships, marital transitions, and grand-parenting relationships. Research into previously ignored topics e.g. the oldest old, emerged, and life-course and feminist approaches strengthened the study of families.

Table 2.2: Family sociology and social gerontology articles ranked by topic.

Substantive Focus of Article	Allen et al., 2000.		Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010.	
	Percent	No. of Articles	Percent	No. of Articles ²
Care-giving	32.6%	296	13%	16
Social Support and Social Networks	13.7%	124	-	-
Parent-adult child relations	10.1%	92	15%	18
Marital status transitions	9.5%	86	11%	14
Grand-parenting	7.8%	71	23%	29
Family relationships and structures	7.1%	64	-	-
Intergenerational exchanges, processes, and transmissions	4.9%	44	16%	20
Living arrangements and parent-child co-residence	4.5%	41	-	-
Bereavement, grief, death and suicide	3.0%	27	7%	8
Siblings	2.6%	24	8%	10
Health care decision making	1.4%	13	-	-
Other	2.8%	26 ³	7%	9 ⁴
Total		908		124

Allen et al. (2000) also suggest that socio-emotional selectivity theory and family solidarity theory were major theoretical advances during this decade. They identified that emergent research included the role of siblings for those ageing without children, immigrants, older black adults, and siblings who care for siblings (although this research is sparse, compared to studies about siblings' role as parental care-givers). Thus, there was a growing appreciation of the diverse and complex nature of family relationships and composition over the life-course, and development of methodological approaches which facilitated a life-

² Note that reference list published by the authors was illustrative not exhaustive

³ Other includes articles about elder abuse, the oldest old, sexual orientation, and theories, methods, reviews & policies.

⁴ Other includes articles about childlessness and the nature of families, which reflect the recognition that normative views no longer represent the lived lives of many adults.

course perspective. Although care-giving dominated the literature, greater complexity in care-giving networks was recognised (Allen et al., 2000). The authors also identified that methodological changes enhanced understanding of the diversity of family life: notably, the application of qualitative methods helped to explore variation, and sophisticated analysis enabled longitudinal data to better illuminate change over time. Better understanding of family care-giving, social support, parent-child relationships, marital transitions, and grand-parenting relationships “*strengthened the research literature on older families, illustrating sensitivity to diversity in age, gender, racial-ethnic background, class, and family circumstances*” (Allen et al., 2000: 912). This, in essence, covers the top five themes in Table 2.2 above. However, as also shown in Table 2.2, the authors’ ranking of 908 family articles published during the 1990s reveals that siblings, a focus of 24 published articles (2.6%) were studied considerably less than parent-adult child relations and grand-parenting.

A decade after Allen et al. (2000) Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) reviewed the major empirical, conceptual and theoretical directions that family sociology took during the first decade of the 21st century. They observed an increase in what they refer to as “*global concerns*” (p1039) namely, interest in: “*how family relationships of older adults’ function differently across national populations and political regimes.*” (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010: 1040). Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) concluded that renewed research interest in family gerontology had been stimulated by growing concerns about population ageing, the inadequacy of health services, and the effect of changes in family structure and composition. Their review highlighted that grand-parenting and intergenerational exchanges were receiving more attention than parent adult-child relationships, but that siblings were still studied less than other family relationships (see Table 2.2, above). The authors identified a developing interest in intergenerational ambivalence research due to increasing recognition that the interplay between self-sufficiency and dependence in family relationships leads to feelings of ambivalence. They ask whether this concept can be used to interpret the sibling relationship.

As outlined in the sections above, more recent sibling research has resulted in a diverse, yet disparate body of work about individuals' relationships with their own sibling(s). Having discussed *what* aspects of sibling relationships have received research attention, I now turn to a consideration of *how* sibling relationships have been researched.

2.7 Approaches to studying sibling relationships

Although different methods have been employed in contemporary sibling relationship research, for the main part they rely on individuals self-reporting experiences, whether via a pre-defined set of questions, or within the freedom of an exploratory interview.

Longitudinal research designs, defined as "A research design in which data are collected...on at least two occasions" (Bryman 2004; 540), seem pertinent to sibling relationships as they have the advantage of allowing changes over time to be explored. Despite drawbacks such as cost and time constraints, loss to follow up, and changes in definition and content, longitudinal survey data are suited to the study of enduring sibling relationships. Using data from pre-existing household and population surveys addresses some of the problems discussed above, although the fact that the datasets are pre-defined can limit detailed investigation. So, despite some limitations, population and survey data could potentially provide a framework for small-scale investigation and aid understanding of the wider social context experienced by participants in such studies, as I discuss next.

Although data pertaining to the quality of relationships between siblings has not been collected as part of large-scale UK population surveys like the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and the National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD: also known as the 1946 birth cohort), data relevant to the past life experiences and circumstances of older adults has. Such data aids our understanding of the impact of societal changes and how older adults' current situation is shaped by socio-economic circumstances, educational opportunities, health, attitudes and behaviours. For example, the NSHD provides a wealth of data about how changing social conditions affected participants. Like the 1946 birth

cohort, many of my participants will have experienced post War austerity and I anticipate that they will have experienced the type of disruption to their family lives described in the NSHD survey. So, the findings of the NHSD provide a wider context for my research, made more relevant by my choice to adopt a life-course approach.

Additional circumstances reported in the most recent NHSD survey report (MRC, 2018) and likely to be shared by my participants, include: experiencing hardships during early parts of the life-course due to devastating infectious childhood illness, and the treatment consequences (such as isolation) and their long-term disadvantages; sibling and/or parental loss during childhood; and living through periods of major educational reform which confer advantage for those who went to grammar school, and disadvantage for those who did not. Like the 1946 birth cohort, my participants will also have experienced shifts in family life such as divorce becoming more common during their life-course. Furthermore, the NHSD finding that those who had a happy childhood were more likely to continue to be socially engaged in later life, may mean that participants who experienced harmonious sibling relationships as children will be more engaged with their siblings now in later life.

Similarly, a major theme arising from ELSA is that long-term socio-economic deprivation is associated with adverse life-course transitions such as marital breakdown, unemployment, lack of social engagement, and depression. ELSA data also tracks changes such as geographical moves, and identifies that moving home in later life can have either a beneficial or detrimental effect, depending on the type of area an individual person moves to. Thus, ELSA data also provides relevant contextual information in that it reveals that the social environment affects older adults' well-being and contributes to understanding that good social networks promote wellbeing in later life (Rafnsson et al, 2015).

Although ELSA and NSHD were not set up to examine sibling relationships per se, some other large-scale longitudinal surveys do include specific questions about sibling relationships. For example, the US Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) examines the effects of social change, inter-generational solidarity, stressful life transitions such as

divorce, economic change, and the effects of ageing, on family life. LSOG asks respondents about some aspects of recent support exchange with their siblings, the geographical distance from their nearest siblings, and also satisfaction and frequency of contact with siblings. The inclusion of such data may reflect the different cultural context between the US and the UK, namely travelling longer distance to visit or care for family members is more normative for North Americans. However, some limitations of LSOG are that it does not seek the perspective of more than one sibling, nor does it capture the reasons for support being given/not given, or ask whether sibling support has been needed.

As reviewed in Chapter Four, White (2001) used data from another US Survey, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) (Sweet and Bumpass, 1996), to examine changes in four dimensions of adult sibling relationship (proximity, contact, giving help, and receiving help). White (2001) mentions some data limitations due to changes in definitions between Time series 1 and 2. For example, only Time series 1 distinguishes between step- and full-siblings and changes in marital status and individual geographical moves are masked. As White (2001) also points out, the focus on behavioural measures is limiting (see page 21).

Spitze and Trent (2006; 2018) also used NSFH data to demonstrate that sibling relationships remain relatively stable despite changes in circumstances over the life-course. They were able to do this because the data collected by the NSFH captures the diversity of family experiences. Although the authors report that the NSFH is one of the best datasets available for the study of intra and intergenerational relationships, and the only longitudinal study which collects data on individual sibling relationships, they note some limitations: the study, which only includes two siblings, under represents larger sibling groups; the age of the data itself (the first wave was collected 1987-1988 and the second wave in 1992-1994); more is known about the primary respondent than about their siblings; and, due to the lack of information about the entire sibling group, they could not determine how particular life-

course changes affect specific sibling relationships. The authors suggest that research which gathers information on complete sibling groups would better aid understanding of how older families function, and how contacts and support exchange are initiated and enacted. Spitze and Trent (2018;524) suggest that this can be gained via qualitative interviews, and that researching “multiple siblings would provide the clearest understanding of how these relationships operate.” They recommend either waiting for data from long term longitudinal studies to become available, or collecting detailed life-histories for complete sibling groups.

Data more pertinent to studying sibling relationships over the life-course is included in other longitudinal studies, and has been reported on by researchers whose work has helped me to determine that gaps in knowledge can be better addressed by qualitative approaches. For example, Smith (2002) used data drawn from The Berlin Aging Study (BASE: Baltes and Mayer, 1999) which she supplemented with additional data about loneliness and satisfaction with current social network relationships in order to capture changes over time (see page 57). Guiaux et al., (2007) compared contact and social support exchange received by widows and non-widowed adults by members of their social network, including siblings, using data from LASA: the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (Deeg et al., 2002). The benefit of using longitudinal study data was that it enabled comparisons to be made between an individual’s social support networks before and after the event of interest (widowhood).

Several researchers have also used data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005) to examine sibling relationships amongst adults of all ages. Although gender, age, contact frequency and place of residence is collected on all of each respondent’s living siblings, additional data (e.g. partner status and parental status, educational level and support exchange) is only collected for up to two randomly selected siblings. This raises the issue of how to choose siblings for analysis. Voorpostel (2007),

who has used this dataset extensively, draws attention to several weaknesses: the NKPS data may be biased because respondents are likely to put forward family members with whom they have better relationships for inclusion; the data does not sufficiently capture the waxing and waning in sibling relationships over the life-course; because the dataset captures the influence of parents on sibling relationships, it may over simplify the interdependency of family relationships; it does not capture relationship quality e.g. closeness, companionship, affection, conflict, support exchange; and, finally, there is an inattention to sibling relationship history, and whether being related biologically has a stronger influence on support exchange than shared experience. Voorpostel (2007) calls for research which focuses on understanding sibling relationships in family context, rather than focusing on sibling dyads. She recommends researching complete sibling groups; extending sibling research to include siblings-in law due to the centrality of such relationships in individuals' lives; and investigating how sibling relationships contribute to the quality of relationships with extended family members e.g. aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces and cousins. Voorpostel (2007) notes that a limitation of her study is its lack of intergenerational focus. This, as I will discuss in Chapter Four led to Knipscheer and van Tilburg (2013) using NKPS data to investigate whether siblings play a significant role in the social networks of older adults. In Chapter Four, I will also review several other research papers based on the NKPS e.g. Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe (2007), Voorpostel et al. (2007), Voorpostel et al. (2012), as well as more recent research by Merz and De Jong Gierveld (2014) about whether earlier life experiences - when siblings share the parental home - influence current sibling relationships.

Thus, longitudinal and largescale population surveys have the advantage of aiding our understanding of long-term changes in society and family life which are pertinent to the lives of older adults. As discussed above, such data has been important in identifying that siblings are important social network members who do respond to changing circumstances. However, because these surveys do not set out to study sibling relationships in detail, the

findings are limited, and can only illuminate the intellectual puzzle I seek to address so far. In order to move the dialogue forward, an approach which seeks to gain detailed knowledge may help to contribute a more in-depth understanding of the nature of older adults' sibling relationships.

Cross-sectional study designs using self-reporting questionnaires and rating scales have been used by many researchers in the field. Results from these studies are sometimes difficult to compare because a snapshot is gained, and measures differ. For example, Lee et al. (1990) used ten items to measure emotional closeness, whereas Cicirelli (1989) used a single item which he argued correlates with more elaborate measures. There are differences too in the sampling frames employed in quantitative research which range from large scale analysis of national survey data (e.g. Spitze and Trent, 2006, 2018; Voorpostel et al., 2012) to smaller samples drawn from a specific locality (e.g. Lam and Power, 1991 used a UK general practice older adult sample). Studies which report differences in dimensions by age, are often based on differences between sample age-groups and not changes in the relationships of specific siblings over time. How well these represent age-effects rather than cohort effects is difficult to interpret. There is also variation in which participant's siblings are included in research if individuals have more than one sibling. Approaches that have been taken include allowing the participant to choose which sibling to report on (Goodboy et al., 2009); or a particular sibling being chosen by the researcher, either randomly (Lee et al., 1990; Voorpostel and Van der Lippe, 2007) or to fulfil a quota sample (Stewart et al., 2001).

Qualitative research into sibling relationships tends to be exploratory in nature, mostly involving in-depth interviews, although one study (Ross and Milgram, 1982) was based on a focus group design. Qualitative studies have tended to support quantitative study findings such as the finding that maintenance of closeness between siblings is affected by life events e.g. marriage and leaving home (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992), and that

ongoing maintenance of closeness is affected by geographical distance. However, qualitative studies have explored specific issues in more depth and, as discussed in Chapter Three, have shed light on how and why the relationship changes over the life-course. Such studies illuminate changes between individuals and their own sibling(s), rather than between age-groups within a sample (e.g. Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992, 2007). Qualitative research studies have also been used to explore the sibling relationship within a specific set of circumstances. For example, Barnes' (2012) study specifically looked at the relationship between siblings when one sibling was caring for another, while Johnson (1999) studied the family relationships, including siblings, of older black men.

2.8 Conclusion

My review of the childhood and adulthood sibling literature has found that prior to the 1970s, the context within which sibling relationships arose was little considered. This was due to inattention to the relationship between individuals and their own siblings, despite several studies carried out by sociologists during the 1960s highlighting its importance in adults' lives (Bossard and Boll, 1960; Cumming and Schneider, 1961; Irish, 1964). Although interest in the relationship between siblings began to develop during the 1970s, research was sporadic and disparate. In addition, despite an increase in the diversity of methods used, quantitative research instruments are still favoured. Results can also be difficult to compare because they provide a glimpse into the relationship, measures differ, and age differences may represent cohort-effects not age-effects. Furthermore, differences in responses have been found between reported and actual behaviour, particularly for men (Stewart et al., 2001); structured questions compared to open questions (Connidis, 1983); and Likert scale response sets compared to written answers (Ogden and Lo, 2012). This casts doubt on their suitability for exploring social relationships in depth. Quantitative data reveals that e.g. closeness changes with age, whereas qualitative data illuminates the reasons for this change (Gold, 1987).

The majority of studies to date are based on well-educated, white, middle-class samples of adults aged over 18. Studies that consider older adults tend to sample the younger segment of the retired/semi-retired population, and are biased towards women, those in good health, and those who have other supportive relationships in place. Generally, researchers ask respondents to rate their relationship with one sibling, based on specific dimensions which mainly relate to contact, closeness, and support. Although useful for identifying common themes between groups of respondents, Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) suggest that this approach does not account for the fact that each individual within a relationship perceives it differently. Furthermore, obtaining just one view on a relationship omits to examine the interplay between different siblings within the same sibling group and whether these dynamics change in response to particular circumstances. A further limitation of this approach is that, given the increases in life expectancy, there are many adults aged 70 and over who have more than one co-surviving sibling. Thus, research based on examining one sibling relationship, often from one perspective, does not give a rounded picture of the role that siblings as a whole play in the lives of older adults. Multiple perspectives should highlight consensus, contradiction, and interdependence between siblings (Cicirelli, 1995) and provide a wider perspective (Connidis, 2007). Connidis (2007) reports that listening to multiple voices provides a better representation of the dynamics within the sibling group, and that a wider range of issues is raised than would be the case if just one point of view was considered.

My review shows too that there is generally an inattention to the nature of the sibling relationship over the life-course, and a paucity of theoretical underpinning (Whiteman 2011; Knipscheer and Tilburg, 2013). There are also notable gaps in the sibling relationship literature, particularly over the last decade. As Knipscheer and van Tilburg (2013) observe, the most recently published sibling review paper (van Volkom, 2006) shows a decline in attention given to sibling relationships. Only ten articles included in van Volkom's review were published between 1999 and 2006. The majority of papers included in the review (44

out of 85) were published during the period 1985-1995. This lack of research attention is attributed to a focus on parent-child relationships in childhood research (Mauthner, 2005), and to the dominance of care-giving and inter-generational relationships research in the family sociology and social gerontology literature (Allen et al., 2000; Chambers et al., 2009; Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010).

However, as discussed, researchers do agree that shared history and duration make sibling relationships important relationship in later life, even though they wane in importance following some life events e.g. leaving home, getting married, and intensify following others e.g. divorce, widowhood (O'Bryant, 1988; Chambers et al., 2009; White, 2001). Despite some research evidence that sibling relationships take on new meaning in later life, little attention is paid to why. Thus, in Chapter Three I draw attention to changes in older adults' sibling relationships, and consider current thinking regarding the role that siblings play in older adults' lives, particularly in terms of emotional closeness, sociability, and support exchange. I have also identified a need to explore the nature of changes that occur in older adults' sibling relationships and whether siblings are supportive at particular times in the life-course, and to move beyond examining sibling relationships from a single perspective. In the next chapter I will therefore focus on identifying gaps in the literature pertaining to older adults' sibling relationships which, together with the gaps identified in this chapter, helped to formulate my research questions.

Chapter Three: Sibling relationships in later life

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I consider the contribution that research has made to understanding why sibling relationships are important in the lives of older adults. I discuss research which identifies age-related changes in sibling relationships and reasons for those changes. Next, I consider the role of siblings as providers of emotional support and sociability in later life. I conclude this chapter by outlining the key findings of my literature review into sibling relationships in later life, and discussing the rationale underpinning my research questions.

3.1 Studying sibling relationships in later life

Although sociologists Cumming and Schneider (1961: 501) concluded, over fifty years ago, that sibling relationships are: “*a very important relational tie of the last 20 or 30 years of life*”, there is still only a limited amount of research that focuses on older adults’ sibling relationships. This is despite the fact that existing research identifies siblings as having an important role to play in self validation (McGhee, 1985) and support in old age (Cicirelli, 1977; Gold, 1987; Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton, 1988; Connidis, 1994).

As discussed in Chapter Two, contemporary researchers variously view adult sibling relationships in Western societies as egalitarian and voluntary (Cicirelli, 1995); responsive to developmental needs (Stewart et al., 2001; White, 2001) and life-course needs (Gold, 1987; White, 2001); influenced by family ties (Blauboer, 2010); and a significant attachment relationship (Cicirelli, 1989; Bank and Kahn, 1997). All of these features, as well as the enduring nature of sibling relationships, make them particularly relevant relationships in the lives of older adults, something which merits further exploration. Moreover, it is suggested that several changes in Western society may in fact increase the significance of older adults’ sibling relationships in the future. First, decreasing family sizes may facilitate more intense

and interdependent sibling ties (Bank and Kahn, 1997); second, because increasing life expectancy has lengthened the duration of sibling relationships, they may resume greater importance in later life (Avioli, 1989; Goetting, 1986; Cicirelli, 1995); and third, more frequent marital breakdown and re-marriage means that siblings may provide support and stability at such times (Bank and Kahn, 1997).

As already noted in Chapter Two, research into older adults' sibling relationships is uncommon when compared to other kin relationships (Spitze and Trent, 2006), despite the fact that many older adults have at least one living sibling (Scott, 1983; Cicirelli, 1995). In fact, a Dutch survey of adults aged between 55 and 89, identified that 86% of respondents had at least one living sibling, and 50% of respondents identified at least one of their siblings as a member of their social network (Knipscheer and Van Tilburg, 2013). There is no firm consensus regarding how sibling relationships develop as we age. Those aspects of older adults' sibling relationships which have been researched are discussed below and include age-related changes in development tasks, emotional closeness, and contact; the importance of sibling relationships in later life, particularly with respect to companionship and support; and the emergence more recently of siblings as care-givers in later life.

3.2 Emotional closeness and contact

Research shows that the *development tasks* of siblings change with age (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987). Emotional support and sociability remain an important aspect of sibling relationships throughout life, yet rivalry and competition diminish with age, and reminiscence and life review come to the fore (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Goetting, 1986; Bedford et al., 2000). Siblings are in a unique position in later life because of a long-standing shared history, and are able to validate and clarify earlier life events and relationships. Reminiscence, although undertaken over the life-course, may become a more

important task in later life as individuals review their lives (Goetting, 1986). Discussing shared, earlier life experiences happens more often between siblings than between parents and adult children, implying that reminiscing is of greater significance to sibling relationships (Gold, 1987).

As discussed in Chapter Two (page 19), some research indicates that nature of the childhood sibling bond has a long-term influence (Bank and Kahn, 1997), and that siblings who continue to have conflicted relationships in later life believe that rivalry is often initiated by their parents (Ross and Milgram, 1982). However, sibling relationships in later life are more commonly characterised by positive feelings (Gold, 1987), and sibling loyalty and affection can exist alongside rivalry and conflict (Bank and Kahn, 1997; Kramer, 2010). Although closeness between adult siblings is rare amongst siblings who were not close in childhood (Scott, 1983), later life appears to be a time when siblings put aside old rivalries and, instead, allow beneficial aspects of their relationship to surface (Allan, 1977; Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987). It may also be that once parents are deceased, there is less to compete over.

Research into levels of *emotional closeness* between siblings suggests that siblings also draw closer in old age (Gold, 1987; Bedford, 1989; Lee et al., 1990; Neyer, 2002), a change that occurs irrespective of how much contact there is between them (Gold, 1987; Bedford, 1989; Lee et al., 1990; Neyer, 2002). In addition to finding increased closeness with age, Connidis and Campbell (1995) report that those who feel closer emotionally to their siblings confide in them more than those who feel less close. As will be discussed, increased closeness may result from the loss of other key relationships (Goetting, 1986), or because past problems are forgiven in later life (Gold, 1987). Also, Gold (1987) highlights that a lack of closeness between siblings is a source of regret in later life. Moreover, it is difficult to isolate the effect of age from the effect of different life-course transitions on closeness. As discussed in Chapter Two (page 18), closer sibling relationships have been observed

between single (Connidis, 1989), divorced (Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973), or widowed individuals (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Scott 1983; O'Bryant 1988) and their siblings, compared to those still married (Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973; Scott, 1983; Avioli, 1989; Connidis, 1989). This may reflect greater emotional attachment to a sibling following that sibling's experience of a personal crisis (Connidis and Campbell, 1995). This has been attributed to a compensatory mechanism, supported by the observation that those who remain single maintain closer sibling relationships than those who marry and become parents (Shanas et al., 1968; Burholt and Wenger, 1998).

There is though a lack of consensus about the long-term influence of marital and parental status on emotional closeness between siblings. White and Riedmann (1992) report limited association between marital status and closeness; Goetting, (1986) suggests that siblings are less close in middle age when they are focused on marital relationships and parenting; Connidis (1992) finds that sharing the common experience of marriage and parenthood draws siblings closer; and Scott (1983), and also White and Riedmann (1992), finds that individuals are closer emotionally to their siblings when they are not parents. The latter is particularly true of divorced and single childless women (Connidis and Davies, 1990). However, Connidis and Campbell's (1995) finding that greater confiding occurred in sibling groups that included parents and childless siblings, compared to those where no siblings have children, may reflect a shared concern for the younger generation and that childless siblings invest more in nieces and nephews than those siblings who have children.

Thus, it is not possible to consider age related changes in isolation from life-course events and transitions. What may be a more important consideration is what effect changes in feelings of emotional closeness towards siblings has on individuals in later life. For example, several studies have examined the effect of the sibling relationship on feelings of emotional well-being, morale and life satisfaction amongst older adults. Cicirelli (1989) used depression scores as a proxy for emotional well-being; Lam and Power (1991) used a

Geriatric Depression Scale; O'Bryant (1988) used a Positive Affect Scale; and McGhee (1985) and also Wilson et al., (1994) used a life satisfaction index. According to McGhee (1985), siblings who consider themselves to be close friends experience a positive effect on morale. When the effects of contact frequency on morale were compared to the effects of intimacy on morale, contact frequency did not have a significant effect on either life satisfaction or loneliness, whereas levels of intimacy did (Wilson et al., 1994). This suggests that the quality of sibling relationships is a more important aspect for consideration. This may be particularly true in later life, when face-to-face contact may be restricted by mobility or health issues, as discussed further below.

In terms of how *changes in contact* affect sibling relationships, Chapter Two identified my reasons for having reservations about the usefulness of contact *per se* as an indicator of the quality of older adults' sibling relationships, particularly because perceived contact and the belief that sibling support can be mobilised when needed, promotes well-being amongst older adults (Gold, 1987; Lam and Power, 1991; White and Riedmann, 1992). In fact, perceived contact and the sense that siblings can be relied upon in a crisis become important even in the absence of regular contact (Cicirelli, 1991,1995). Furthermore, although some research suggests that contact between siblings reduces with age (Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973; Pulakos, 1987; White and Riedmann, 1992; White, 2001), older adults are not a homogenous group, and contact declines less for those with larger sibling networks, African Americans, Latinos, and women, and rises amongst the over 70s when they live nearby (White, 2001). Factors such as availability of time, ill-health of family members, and the loss of other relationships, alter contact frequency (Connidis, 1992). Although contact frequency receives more research attention than closeness and support, reporting on contact frequent contributes little understanding about the *nature* of contact and whether contact results from a desire to be with one's sibling, or from a sense of duty.

A few studies show that levels of affection have a stronger influence on contact than feelings of obligation, particularly for respondents with living parents, for women, and for women with sisters (e.g. White and Riedmann, 1992; Connidis, 1995). This supports the suggestion that sibling relationships, with their emphasis on sociability, may not share some of the obligatory factors typical of vertical family ties (Cumming and Schneider, 1961). When respondents' attitudes towards engaging in specified activities with their siblings e.g. going on holiday together, were examined, lower levels of emotional closeness and more perceived feelings of responsibility towards a sibling were predictive of obligatory contact motivation, followed by closer geographical proximity and not having children at home (Lee et al., 1990). Conversely, those who felt closer emotionally and more responsible for their sibling, were more likely to choose to spend time with their sibling (discretionary contact motivation). The authors argue that obligation may feel less burdensome when siblings are emotionally close (Lee et al., 1990).

As discussed earlier in Chapter Two (page 15) with respect to sibling relationships between adults of all ages, geographical proximity contributes to the frequency of sibling contact (Lee et al., 1990) and the maintenance of sibling ties (Matthews et al., 1989), followed by emotional closeness (Lee et al., 1990). Ross and Milgram (1982) found that a move nearer to a sibling resulted in closer feelings resurfacing, and siblings who live nearer to one another are more likely to be considered close friends (Connidis, 1989). For those with more than one sibling, Connidis and Campbell (1995) found that although close geographical proximity enhances emotional closeness to the entire sibling group, an individual's emotionally closest sibling is not necessarily their most proximate sibling.

In later life, when distance separates siblings, physical mobility or ill health may become barriers to the maintenance of close sibling relationships. However, how much physical distance translates into emotional distance is not fully explored. As raised earlier in Chapter

Two, means of remaining in contact when distant are more accessible, reliable and visual in our modern technological age, so it may be easier and less costly for current cohorts of older adults to maintain contact compared to the participants who took part in the studies included in this review.

Whether having multiple siblings provides more opportunities to remain in contact, or to receive news about them via other family members, is not clear. Lee et al. (1990) found higher levels of discretionary contact motivation for smaller families, and no relationship between obligatory contact motivation and the number of siblings. Although it may seem logical that more siblings mean more shared family events, e.g. birthdays, larger families have to divide resources between them (Lee et al., 1990), including availability of time.

In conclusion, levels of contact alone do not appear to be the most suitable criteria for measuring the quality of older adults' sibling relationships because, as discussed, their sense of closeness to their siblings does not appear to depend on the amount of face-to-face contact (Gold, 1987). Goetting (1986) suggests that the quality of contact may be enhanced in old age, rather than frequency of contact which might be restricted by health and mobility problems, making it an unreliable measure of how important sibling relationships are in later life (Gold, 1987). Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter Two, contact tends to be measured over a specific period of time, possibly because researchers believe it can be readily quantified. However, I found this limiting and difficult to interpret, because one participant's contact with their sibling of "three times per week" might literally involve a series of two-minute phone calls, whereas another sibling's contact of "less than once a week" might have been a memorable day out.

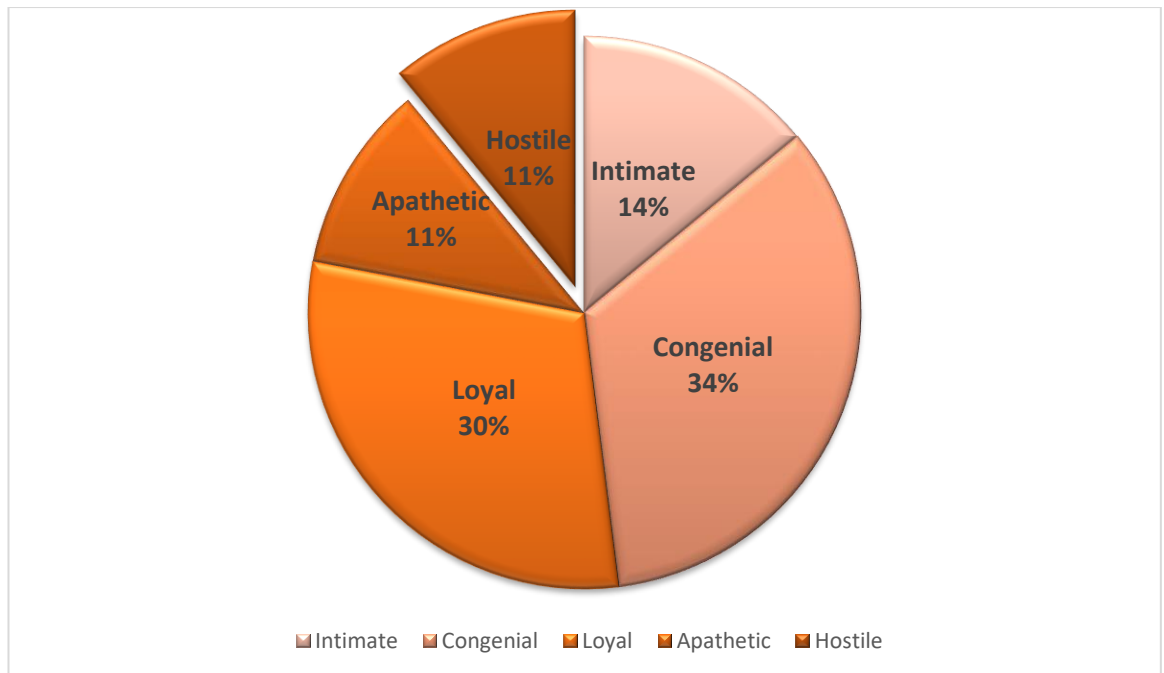
In terms of the *importance of sibling relationships in old age*, as outlined by Chambers et al. (2009), siblings are important antidotes against the loneliness which 32% of older people aged 65 and over report (Victor et al., 2004), having a positive effect on morale, life satisfaction, psychological well-being (e.g. McGhee, 1986; Cicirelli, 1989; McCamish-Svensson et al., 1999) and physical health (McCamish-Svensson et al., 1999). This may be particularly so for those who experience greater vulnerability over the life-course due to class, gender, ethnicity, or disability, effects which may be compounded in later life (Stoller and Campbell-Gibson, 2000). Both adults and children highlight that siblings provide emotional support and security, share a connection, and find comfort from the belief that a sibling will always be there (Gold, 1987; Edwards et al., 2005). Interestingly, older adults report feelings of responsibility towards siblings, particularly if poor health, loneliness, or financial difficulties makes their siblings appear vulnerable (Gold, 1987).

Gold (1989) used the multiple dimensions of psychological involvement, closeness, acceptance, emotional support, instrumental support, contact, envy, and resentment to categorise sibling relationship types amongst adults aged 60 and over. Five sibling types were identified (see Table 3.1, and Figure 3.1, below) of which the majority are positive.

Table 3.1: Characteristics of each sibling type in old age (after Gold, 1989)

Sibling Type	Description
Intimate	Best friends, emotionally interdependent, psychologically involved, accepting and assisting.
Congenial	Good friends, similar to intimate siblings, except not as empathic and emotionally close.
Loyal	Family oriented, sharing a relationship based on allegiance to the wider family, rather than on a more personal level. Communication tends to be infrequent, and siblings are not close psychologically or physically.
Apathetic	Never close and are indifferent towards one another. Communication is rare, as is shared time together. They take no responsibility for each other, and psychological involvement is negligible.
Hostile	Do not get along, and show high levels of negativity towards each other, particularly with respect to resentment, envy and rivalry. There is little social support between them, and they may even avoid each other completely.

Figure 3.1: Distribution of sibling types in old age (after Gold, 1987).



The lack of negative sibling relationships in old age (Gold, 1987; 1990; Goodboy et al., 2009) as discussed earlier, has been attributed to beneficial aspects of sibling relationships surfacing as perceptions shift (Allan, 1977; Ross and Milgram, 1982; Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987; Stewart et al., 2001). However, describing older adult sibling relationships in this way provides a static image of them, and does not capture changes and re-negotiations over the life-course.

3.3. Companionship and support

In terms of *siblings' role as companions and providers of emotional support* in later life, here I consider research which indicates that, during later life, siblings may provide help during an illness, financial assistance, advice, help with tasks, and provide transport (Goetting, 1986).

Sibling support increases in later life (Lee et al., 1990), particularly following widowhood (O'Bryant, 1988), and between nearby siblings aged over 70 (White, 2001). As discussed below, siblings are sometimes formal care-givers in later life, particularly when they take over the care of a disabled sibling (Barnes, 2012).

The significance of social support, particularly from family members, in promoting older adults' emotional and physical well-being is well documented (e.g. Hooyman and Kiyak, 1991; Victor, 2004). Allan (2008) reports that family members are important sources of support in later life that is rarely undertaken by friends. In the UK, demographic changes have led to an increase in the number of generations alive at the same time, but a decrease in the number of family members within each generation (Centre for Policy on Ageing Review, 2014). As life expectancy increases, availability of time together for some family relationships such as siblings, or spouses (for those in long term marriages) may also increase. However, at the same time, decreases in fertility and increases in divorce rates mean that some older adults may lack family support in later life. Moreover, because more men live alone due to increased divorce, which historically has been more detrimental to men's relationships with their children than it has to women's, the issue of older men at risk of isolation and loneliness merits attention (Martin Matthews, 2001).

Social support can reduce loneliness, have a positive effect on well-being (Chen and Feeley, 2012) and is associated with longevity (Luszcz and Giles, 2002). Focusing on the social support that older adults give and receive from spouses has limitations, as older adults, particularly women, are more likely to have a living sibling than a living spouse. Cicirelli (1982), in a review of studies of older people reported that between 78% and 94% had at least one living sibling, although, at their time of birth, family sizes were larger than they are today (Bank, 1995). However, increased life expectancy may mean that those fewer siblings of future generations of older adults are more likely to survive together.

Sibling support may be particularly significant for the post-war baby boom cohort who, in later life, will have fewer children and more siblings than any preceding cohort (Avioli, 1989; Bengston et al., 1996). In a study which identified that emotional loneliness increased amongst the over 70s due to the loss of important relationships (Smith, 2002), peer relationships were preferred for emotional support, and dissatisfaction with younger family members became more prevalent with age. Given the high proportion of older adults with living siblings, and the unique characteristics of sibling relationships, they are potentially a valuable resource for older adults.

Although little attention has been paid to factors associated with provision of support by siblings in later life (Cicirelli et al., 1992; White and Riedmann, 1992), the relationship between emotional closeness and support has been examined, often for specific groups of older adults. This research finds sibling relationships important for older adults who lack other types of family support, for example those who are widowed, divorced, single, or ageing without children (Bedford and Avioli, 2001). Widowhood appears to mobilise sibling support the most (Campbell et al., 1999; O'Bryant, 1988), albeit temporarily (Guiaux et al., 2007; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2014). O'Bryant (1988) examined the supportive behaviours of the siblings of recent widows, according to the siblings' own marital status. Of the widows who were all living independently in urban America, 80% had at least one child in close proximity, and 83.6% had at least one living sibling, the majority of whom lived within the same city or within a three-hour drive. Siblings were more likely to be sisters, and only 3% of brothers were widowed compared to 36% of sisters. 51% of widows with a sibling in the same city received help from them, and another 10% received help from siblings living outside the city in nearby small towns. However, overall, most help came from adult children, and widows with adult children living nearby were less likely to receive support from their siblings.

O'Bryant (1988) also reports that the widows in her sample received more support from unmarried sisters who lived nearby compared to their other siblings. 70% of the unmarried sisters, who were also widows, were more likely to provide support to the participating widow when she was feeling low, or ill. Married sisters living nearby helped with transport, emotional support and care when ill, and about 20% of their spouses helped practically. Interestingly, contact with a married sister had a positive effect on morale, but contact with a widowed sister had a negative effect. For childless widows, positive affect was related to having more married sisters nearby, but not to having more unmarried sisters nearby. Overall, health issues, seeing a married sister frequently, having a married sister living nearby, and being a parent, were significant predictors of well-being. Mothers expressed higher levels of wellbeing than childless widows. Overall, married and unmarried sisters supported in different ways, and brothers-in-law provided practical help. The widows' own brothers and their brothers' wives did not really feature (O'Bryant, 1988).

Another US study found that for married respondents, spouses and adult children provided significantly more emotional and practical support than siblings (Wilson et al., 1994). For unmarried respondents, there was little difference in emotional support provided by siblings and adult children, and significantly more practical support was received from children than from siblings or friends (Wilson et al., 1994). This corroborates an early US study finding that adult children provide more practical assistance to older adults than siblings (Scott, 1983).

As discussed earlier, researchers into childhood and adulthood sibling relationships identify that gender plays an important role, and may do so in later life too. A US study of rural older adults found that availability of a sister was positively associated with life satisfaction for women (McGhee, 1985). The availability of a brother was also positively associated with life satisfaction for men, but not significantly. This suggests that sisters have more influence

than brothers on the life satisfaction of siblings of both sexes, and that women are more involved in kinship relations. Another study of older adults in urban America by Cicirelli (1989), found that depression scores for older men with brothers were significantly higher than scores for older men with sisters. Similarly, for female respondents, feeling close to sisters was associated with less depression. In addition, greater conflict with, and indifference to sisters, was associated with greater depression (Cicirelli, 1989). The perception of a close bond to sisters (by either men or women) appears to be important to the older person's well-being (as indicated by fewer symptoms of depression), whereas a close bond to brothers seems to have little relevance.

This fits with the literature around kin-keeping in general. As mentioned in Chapter One, the literature finds women more likely to adopt the family-kin keeper role (Bracke et al., 2008). Research supports this view that women are more likely to maintain ties with kin and appear more willing to provide support (Lee et al., 1990). In fact, respondents with living sisters report significantly more perceived and actual support from their siblings, and are more likely to give support to siblings, whereas women without sisters particularly lack sibling support (White and Riedmann, 1992). However, women were more likely to receive help from siblings when ill, regardless of the gender of their sibling. Connidis (1994) found that her Canadian sample of adults aged 55 and over were more likely to receive help from a same-sex sibling, although the gender effect was stronger for women. Another Canadian study of adults aged 55 and over by Campbell et al. (1999) concludes that sibling support is less important for men, particularly if they live further away. For those without siblings, one study reports that friends (43%) and other relatives (27%) are the most often named confidants for men, whereas friends (42%) and children (33%) are for women (Campbell et al., 1999).

In later life, family members provide more support than friends (Allan 2008), and data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study reveals that siblings, who play a prominent role in older adults' social networks, contribute more than other age peers (Knipscheer and van Tilburg, 2013). This study also demonstrates that siblings are important in the lives of older adults because, although children are prioritised in terms of contact, siblings exchange more support relative to the levels of contact between them (Knipscheer and Tilburg, 2013).

Changes in the existence and functioning of other relationships e.g. parents, or spouses, affects sibling dynamics in later life (Depner and Ingersoll Dayton, 1998). Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1998) use a life span developmental model - the convoy of social support (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980) - to explore whether observed age-related changes in social support amongst their national sample of Americans aged 50 and over, are due to the loss of key relationships (changes in existence) in the convoy, or changes in the levels of support exchanged (changes in functioning). The convoy model suggests that individuals are accompanied on life's journey by a group of people with whom social support is exchanged. The convoy can be presented visually as a set of three concentric circles. The inner circle contains the individual's closest, most stable relationships, with whom the most support is exchanged. The middle circle contains people that the individual feels relatively close to, and those in the outer circle tend to perform a particular role. Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1988) found that whereas age altered the functioning of relationships with children and friends, and friends who were lost tended to be replaced, siblings were irreplaceable. Emotional support was affected by the loss of siblings in later life, depriving older adults of an opportunity to both receive and provide emotional support. Although women have larger and more active convoys, they are as affected by sibling loss as men are, because they do not have larger sibling networks than men (Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton, 1988).

The authors commented that the:

“single greatest risk to continued support rests with changes in the existence of relationships. Thus, interventions should be targeted to deal with relationship loss, not with changes in functioning.” (Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton, 1988: 355).

According to Connidis (1994), individuals are more involved with siblings who are childless. Furthermore, following the loss of a spouse, older adults with no children become closer to their siblings than those with adult children. The closest relationship, however, is observed between individuals and siblings who have never married (Scott, 1983). It is also suggested that in the absence of an available child for support, sibling relationships become more significant in later life (Goetting, 1986). Single and childless respondents have a greater proportion of siblings in their social support networks than those who are married and have children (Connidis and Davies, 1988), which is particularly true of older adults. This may reflect greater lifetime availability of the single and childless, and more recent availability of the previously married, for sibling contact.

Geographical proximity is related to the receipt of practical support from siblings and to perceptions about the availability of support, if needed (White and Riedmann, 1992; Connidis, 1994). Practical support is more likely to come from those nearby, because distance imposes time constraints. According to Campbell et al. (1999) geographical proximity and marital status, together, affect sibling support. When living close by, siblings play a major role in the social support network for single men, and are second, to friends, for single women. When they live further away they play a smaller role for both sexes. The authors find that a spouse is the main source of support for married men, but friends and children are also important for women. For widowers, a child is the most central network member, then friends, followed by nearby siblings, with distant siblings featuring less. For widows, nearby siblings are the most common supportive relationships, followed by friends.

If siblings live further away, friends feature more. For those with no siblings, friends and children dominate. Among those divorced and separated, children and friends are central to support. Siblings make-up about 20% of the support network for both divorced men and women, if they live nearby (Campbell et al., 1999). Thus, living with a partner and the availability of adult children is associated with fewer supportive sibling relationships (Cicirelli et al., 1992; White and Riedmann, 1992; Connidis, 1994).

Being part of a larger family also confers benefits in actual and perceived levels of sibling support in later life. 44% of adults in Connidis's (1994) Canadian sample of individuals aged over 55 with two siblings, 37% of those with three siblings, 25% of those with four siblings, and 25% of those with five or more siblings, received support from all of their siblings. Although help was more likely to be received from one sibling, respondents felt that in a crisis the majority of their siblings would assist them (Connidis, 1994). As the majority of respondents had a spouse, adult child, or both that they could rely on for help, and 76% of the sample were in good health, results may reflect low levels of need. Furthermore, in most circumstances, only one person is needed to provide support. However, for larger families it is not clear whether the one person who helps is generally more supportive, or if support exchange is based on a family decision (Connidis, 1994).

Pulakos (1987) concludes that being brought up in a close family promotes positive feelings between adult siblings, and having a living parent increases contact, affection, and support exchange between adult siblings (White and Riedmann, 1992). When parents provided emotional support, siblings were more likely to exchange practical *and* emotional support; but when parents only provided practical support, siblings were likely to only exchange practical support (Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008).

Poor relationship quality with parents was associated with more supportive sibling exchange, suggesting that siblings compensate for poor parental relationships (White and Riedmann, 1992; Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008). Thus, support between siblings is influenced by family context, not just their own relationship. Whether parental influence endures into later life is unexplored.

Whether sibling support would extend to living together in later life was investigated in a small study of older adults (Borland, 1987). Just over half of respondents felt that it was an option that they would consider in the future. When asked to rank alternative options to living independently in later life, living with a sibling was preferred to living in a nursing home, and considered comparable to living with adult children. In terms of actually living with a sibling during adulthood, men were more likely to have lived with a sibling at some point than women. However, in 90% of cases where respondents had lived with a sibling, that sibling was with a sister.

In summary, the literature suggests that perceptions of sibling support amongst older adults are greater than levels of actual support, and reports about support given are greater than support received. Gold (1989) reported that 95% of older adults would struggle rather than ask siblings for help unless it was an emergency. However, these are predominantly healthy samples, living independently in urban areas, often with other key relationships available to them (e.g. spouses, children) so may represent respondents who are not in need of sibling support, but who feel that siblings would be there for them, if needed, in the future. As discussed in Chapter Two, research into sibling relationships amongst ethnic minority groups is rarer, and even more so in old age. One study by Johnson (1999) which focuses on the family lives of older black men, reveals unique features of minority group families that are beneficial and endure, such having strong collateral ties to siblings.

3.4 Siblings as care-givers

Next, I look at more formal support between siblings, a theme that is relatively new within the field of sibling relationship research. *Care-giving*, a major theme within the family literature (Allen et al., 2000; Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010; Elise et al., 2016), encompasses a broad range of supportive behaviours which have emerged relatively recently in the context of care-giving *between* siblings (Dew et al., 2004; Taggart et al., 2008; Barnes, 2012; Kudela, 2012). Previously, research explored how unequal division of care for an ageing parent affects adult children's sibling relationships (Checkovich and Stern, 2002; van Volkom, 2006). This fits with a general focus of attention within the family literature on adults caring for older parents, which finds that women provide more family care than men (Martin Matthews, 2001; Elise et al., 2016). However, care-giving is often hierarchical, with the primary carer supported by networks which adapt to changes in support provision and need (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010; Kudela, 2012).

Due to demographic changes, siblings in early old age may experience sharing care-giving duties towards an ageing parent between them, whereas those in later old age may experience caring for each other, or one sibling caring for another. Research highlights that lone sisters are more likely to provide parental care with brothers becoming primary care-givers in the absence of nearby sisters (Allen et al., 2000). However, brothers and sisters focus on different tasks, and the more emotionally supportive tasks of sisters tend to be emphasised (Cicirelli et al., 1992; Kudela, 2012). For instance, sisters tend to focus on domestic care and emotional needs of older parents, whereas brothers organise professional care and home maintenance. It is noted that brothers' contributions tend to be less acknowledged (Cicirelli 1992).

In terms of the circumstances that led to and individual care-giving for their sibling, Barnes's (2012) study revealed that the health problems experienced by three of the five older adults cared for by their siblings are diverse, yet common complaints of old age. Furthermore, co-morbidities were evident: deafness and mobility problems; Parkinson's disease and stroke; dementia and cancer. The presence of male sibling care-givers may indicate future diversification in the nature of care-giving (Barnes, 2012; Kudela, 2012), possibly as a result of women's working patterns changing (Martin Matthews, 2001). Although their own ill-health or frailty may prevent some older adults from helping their sibling, most do what they can (Allan, 1977; Connidis, 1989).

The life expectancy of the general population, and of those born with an intellectual or developmental disability is increasing (Taggart et al., 2008). Because the majority of people born with an intellectual or developmental disability in the UK are cared for parents who are aged 60 or over (Taggart et al., 2008) the likelihood of their siblings becoming involved in their care, once parents are no longer able to do so, may become more common (Borland, 1987; Matthews, 1987 cited by Connidis, 1995; Dew et al., 2004; Barnes, 2012). Moreover, siblings bring unique knowledge and understanding to care-giving and positively affect life satisfaction (Barnes, 2012).

The feminist ethic of care perspective used by Barnes (2012), aids understanding of the cultural, social and relational context of care which helps to illuminate the motivations, experiences and consequences of sibling care-giving. Barnes (2012) illustrates that past context is important in understanding why care-givers perceive sibling relationships to be more reciprocal than they appear. Martin-Matthews (2001) notes that past context may contribute to a care-giver's perception that support is reciprocal because of support received in the past by the person they currently care for.

This may be particularly important for siblings in Western cultures where sibling relationships are more egalitarian to begin with. In fact, recent literature provides a more balanced view of care-giving, in which older adults are both providers and recipients of family care (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010).

Next, I consider the effect of more diverse family forms on the sibling relationships of older adults because changes in family structure may add greater meaning to sibling relationship which may remain relatively stable in the face of other changes.

3.5 Diverse family forms and sibling relationships

As noted in Chapter Two (page 32), the issue of defining “*family*” for research purposes is not straightforward, particularly for older adults living alone without access to biological kin (Johnson, 1999; Martin Matthews, 2001). Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) also note that a nuclear family focus occurs in the literature on ageing families despite recognition that family relationships can now take many forms. In other words, the increasing sensitivity to diverse family forms noted in the earlier review by Allen et al. (2000), has not yet been applied to research on ageing families, nor to sibling relationships (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). They also note that research on ageing families is lagging behind observed changes such as increasing ethnic diversity; disrupted, step and blended families; and greater legitimacy of same sex unions. Although one Canadian study identifies that 15% of older adults’ “family” are fictive kin due to geographical dispersion or loss of biological kin (Martin Matthews, 2001), the significance of fictive sibling relationships is little understood.

Whilst diverse family structures are now more commonplace, little is known about how they affect older adults’ support availability, nor their likely impact on future cohorts of older adults who have higher rates of divorce and re-marriage than current cohorts (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). Although some of these changes lag in older populations, older adults

can be indirectly affected by such changes through their connection to younger generations. Furthermore, a more direct impact on older adults is not far off (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). Conversely, while diversity in family life exists, it is important to recognise that previous research identifies that sibling relationships become more salient in later life. This emphasises the importance of exploring the role of sibling relationships in later life because, for some adults, they are more enduring and stable than other family and personal relationships.

3.6 Future considerations

Demographic and social changes are thus making significant changes to family structures (e.g. Allan, 2008; Phillipson, 2013). Given that family relationships are still so valued (Chambers et al, 2009), it is important to consider how these changes and altered family structures affect older adults' family relationships. For example, the very old of today have fewer children and siblings than the cohort born during the post second world war baby boom (Martin Matthews, 2001). However, increased life expectancy lengthens the period of emotional and instrumental support exchange within and across generations, which is particularly pertinent to enduring sibling relationships (Connidis, 2001; Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). These changes in family composition, leading to fewer children per generation, may also increase interdependency (Bank and Kahn, 1997). Today's siblings are more likely to be closer in age and experience longer life expectancy which may extend sibling ties further (Martin Matthews, 2001; Spitze and Trent, 2018), and extend the period over which support exchange occurs (Connidis, 2001; Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). Despite most people having a high chance of a sibling co-surviving with them into later life (Cicirelli, 1995), little is known about how sibling relationships contribute to people's experience of growing old. Although sibling relationships may seem insignificant in adults' daily lives, they gain importance when the perspective is widened to include an individual's whole life (White, 2001).

As discussed earlier, data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Knipscheer and Tilburg, 2013) illustrate the significance of siblings in the social networks of many people in later life. In the future, it is predicted that this will change as a result of decreased birth rates, higher proportions of couples ageing without children, and increasing divorce rates. More attention to siblings' roles in future studies on families seems to be required (Knipscheer and Tilburg, 2013). Merz and De Jong Gierveld, (2014) highlight the contribution that siblings make in reducing loneliness in widowed adults over the age of 50. The authors find that emotional support happens for participants who are proximate and for those whose siblings are geographically distant. The authors also found that participants who report tension in their sibling relationships are more likely to experience loneliness as the result of having a problematic sibling relationship, envy those with warm sibling relationships, and want to redress the situation. This raises the point that less positive sibling relationships, and the consequence of having problematic relationships with siblings, are given little attention. The findings of a study by Bedford et al., (2000) suggest that the consequences of having more conflicted sibling relationships are not necessarily always negative, because achievement can be an enduring effect of conflict between adult siblings. However, this seems to be a less likely scenario in later life. Gold (1987) indicates that those with conflictual relationships describe a mellowing in later life and a tendency to forgive past behaviours.

As discussed, only a limited number of studies examine care-giving by siblings (e.g. Barnes, 2012; Kudela, 2012) even though it seems likely that this may increase as life expectancy amongst the general population, *and* amongst adults who are unable to live independently, rises. As noted earlier, siblings may take over the role of parental care-givers in the future for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Dew et al., 2004; Kudela, 2012).

Although endurance is a unique feature of sibling relationship, few studies examine the relationship between individuals and their own sibling(s) over time. One longitudinal panel study identifies that emotional loneliness increases amongst people aged over 70 due to the loss of important relationships (Smith, 2002). Although younger family members provide instrumental support and social contact, peer relationships are preferred for emotional support. Moreover, dissatisfaction with younger family members becomes more prevalent with increasing age. Another longitudinal panel study found that sibling support increases for those aged over 70 (White, 2001). Stewart et al. (2001) argue that only longitudinal studies can investigate changes in sibling relationships over the life-course. However, even such longitudinal data (e.g. White 2001) represents a fragment of a relationship whose most unique feature lies in its duration, and may be capturing age-group differences rather than changes. Thus, an alternative approach is to use in-depth interviews to explore the influence of past context, events, experiences, and linked lives on older adult's sibling relationship(s) over the life-course. This may provide more insight into the dynamics of sibling relationships than quantitative measures alone.

3.7 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that there are a number of notable features to sibling relationships in later life. In particular, sociability and emotional support appear to be especially important and are viewed positively by siblings. This seems to be due to a combination of diminishing rivalry and competition as older adults come to appreciate the uniquely enduring aspects of their sibling relationship (e.g. reminiscing, shared understanding and companionship). In addition, the loss of other key relationships in later life is something that siblings can both share and understand, and explains why siblings play an important role in combating loneliness and improving morale in later life. Siblings are also important providers of support especially following widowhood (O'Bryant, 1988) and, in some cases, may become formal care-givers for a sibling who is disabled or

experiencing health problems in later life (Barnes, 2012). Older adults feel an increasing sense of responsibility towards siblings (Gold, 1987) and willingly respond to particular needs (e.g. illness, financial help) (Goetting, 1986). As a consequence of the changes to family structures discussed in section 3.6 above, it is possible that these key features of later life sibling relationships will become even more evident amongst future cohorts.

My own study seeks to address some of the silences in the literature. Although older cohorts are living in the midst of changes in family practices, why is their sibling relationship retained despite these changes, and why is it important in old age? Although different life circumstances cause variation, sibling bonds remains positive for most people (Bank, 1995; van Volkom, 2006). Thus, my study aims to elicit detailed accounts of sibling relationships from the perspective of adults aged over 70: a time of life when sibling relationships are believed to take on new meaning (Gold, 1987; Smith, 2002). As outlined in this Chapter and in Chapter Two, research findings based on measures of emotional closeness, contact and support often produce contradictory results. I have indicated that some of this apparent contradiction may be due to the methodologies employed and the different types of sample used. It may also be the case that findings appear to contradict each other because the measures studied are not static, and undergo changes over the life-course. The research questions that arose from my literature review were presented in Chapter One, (page 7). The following explanation provides an account of the reasons for choosing these questions.

My first research question arises from my conclusion that it is essential to explore how older people actually view their sibling relationships, and ask them to define what makes siblings important, rather than asking them to rate their relationships using pre-defined scales. By asking them about the benefits they feel having a sibling provides them with currently, I aimed to obtain pertinent information about siblings' roles in the lives of older adults today.

Literature review findings have shown that researchers tend to ask questions about specific forms of support, but have not provided older adults with an opportunity to tell researchers why they enjoy spending time with their sibling(s). Furthermore, interviewing multiple siblings from the same family should gain a more rounded picture of their importance.

My second research question is based on my aim to enhance the knowledge base regarding changes which occur in sibling relationships over the life-course. Although this is not totally unexplored territory, few studies engage adults in the age range that I wished to study, or ask them to talk about changes that have occurred in their sibling relationships over their whole lives. By taking a long-term biographical view, I aim to discover whether changes in support provided by siblings are sustained beyond an initial crisis period, or change as adaptations to new life transitions occur. Furthermore, by gaining more than one perspective, I hope to explore some of the issues raised by my literature review: for example, perceived support seeming more important than actual support, and differences in perceptions of support given compared to support received. By gaining multiple perspectives, insight may be gleaned into whether sibling support has been needed and/or adequately or willingly given.

My third research question is about how siblings re-negotiate their relationship over the life-course, and whether this continues into later life. The literature suggests that sibling relationships are responsive to developmental and life-course needs, and gives an impression of a relationship that is of primary importance during childhood, then fades into the background, coming to the fore again if needed in response to life-course transitions. I felt that it was important to explore whether older adults are able, by reflecting back on their relationship(s), to provide insight into this process.

My fourth research question relates to the debate over whether gender determines the salience of sibling ties, which is identified in sibling relationship research amongst younger adults. The influence of gender on sibling relationships will be explored by examining similarities and differences in male and female participants' views, and comparing accounts of same-sex sibling relationships with those of opposite-sex sibling relationships.

As also noted in my review, existing adult sibling relationship research tends to examine only one viewpoint about a single sibling relationship. Consequently, I aimed to involve multiple siblings in order to explore the complexity of sibling relationships, and highlight consensus, contradiction, and the interdependency that exists between family relationships (Connidis, 2007). Because individuals can have a good understanding of the dynamics of other family relationships (Allan et al., 2011), a multi-perspectival approach should provide a more rounded picture of the relationship (Mauthner, 2000; Harden et al., 2010), and understanding of whether sibling relationships are re-negotiated over the life-course, or if reconstruction of memories leads to perceptual shifts (Ross and Milgram, 1982). Due to lack of knowledge *a priori* this exploratory project aims to identifying themes and generate theory. In Chapter Four, I outline how I propose to explore the influence of past context, events, experiences, and linked lives on this enduring relationship which is responsive to life-course needs (White, 2001; Blauboer, 2010). I also seek to facilitate understanding about what life-course transitions might contribute to the finding that sibling relationships are more relevant in old age (Gold, 1987; White, 2001; Stewart et al., 2009).

Chapter Four: Methodology

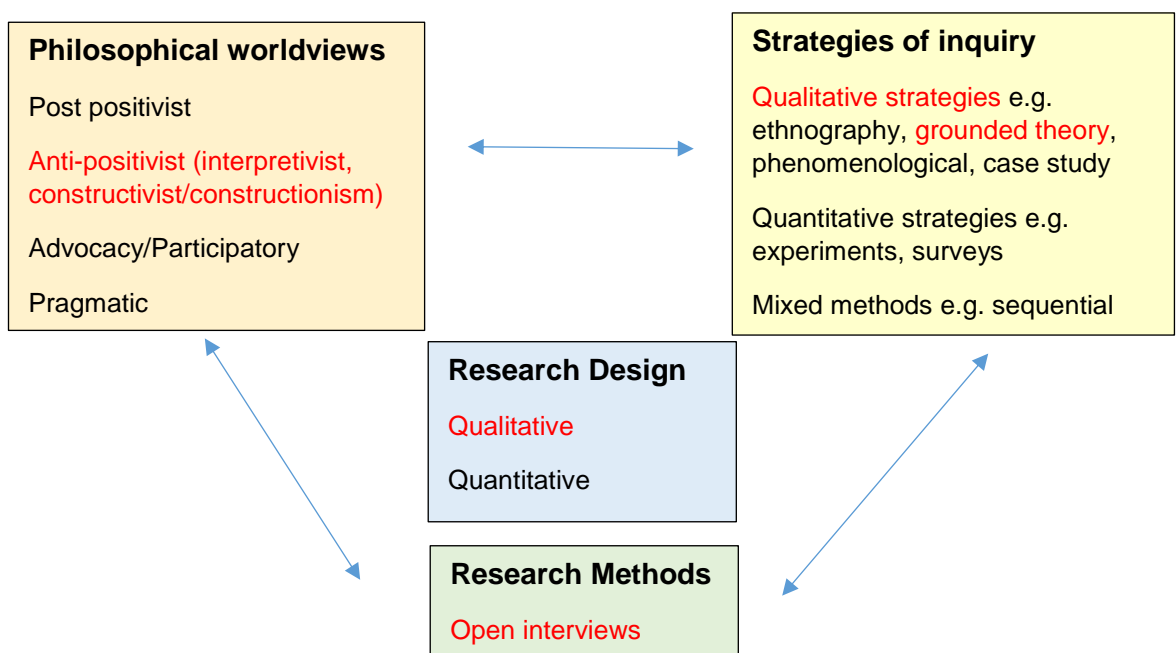
4.0 Introduction

In Chapter Four I present my underlying methodological approach. Initially, I discuss how my methodological framework, which underpins the study, evolved. Next, I detail the methodology and theoretical approach used to inform my research strategy. Subsequently, I explain why qualitative research methods were used to explore the research questions detailed at the end of Chapter Three. Next, I discuss my position within the research process, and close this chapter by drawing attention to validity and research ethics.

4.1 Developing my research approach

As outlined by others (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Gray, 2014), methodological decisions are influenced by researchers' philosophical assumptions, their research strategies, and their approach to conducting the research, which interconnect as shown below. My influences and subsequent modes of inquiry, highlighted in red, were also shaped by the ideas which evolved as my understanding of sibling relationships grew.

Figure 4.1: Interconnection of worldviews, inquiry & methods (Cresswell, 2009: 5)



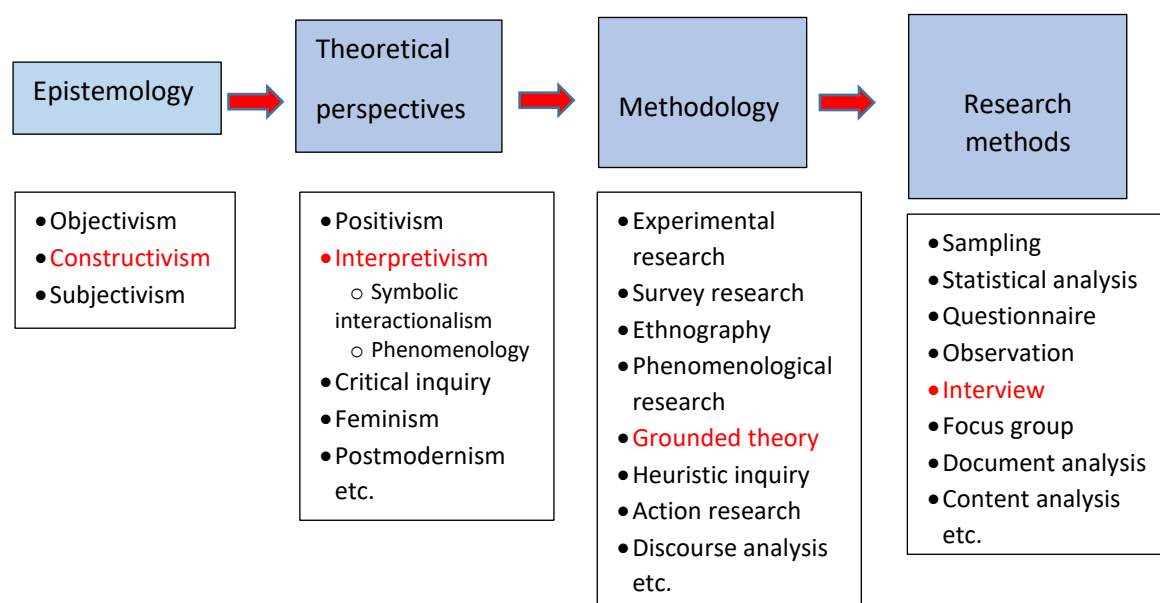
When considering my ontological and epistemological standpoint, my interest in understanding meaning and exploring the nature of social relationships led me away from objectivity and positivism, towards a position grounded in interpretivism (Crotty, 1998). This subjective ontological assumption: that reality is socially constructed rather than discovered (Bryman, 2012), allows for multiple versions of truth to exist because individuals interpret truth differently, according to their own perspective (Gray 2014). Therefore, it is through interaction with the external world that individuals create truth and meaning.

Although inconsistent use of the terms interpretivism, constructivist and constructivism exist within the literature, they can be considered as contrasting world views to positivism (Flick, 2014a). This may be why constructivist and interpretivist world views have been described as synonymous with each other (Cresswell, 2009). For instance, Bryman describes constructionism as:

“an ontological position (often also referred to as constructivism) that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors.” (Bryman, 2004: 538).

Others argue that constructivism and interpretivism are theoretical perspectives which, although linked, are not synonymous (e.g. Gray, 2014). Social constructivist/ constructivism are forms of interpretative approaches that can be used to explore individuals' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006: Hadley, 2015). I found it useful to adopt Gray's (2014) schema to depict the relationship between epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and research methods. A subjective ontology tends towards an epistemology - or approach to gaining knowledge - based on constructivism and an interpretivist theoretical perspective. As shown in Figure 4.2, my influences and choices are highlighted in red.

Figure 4.2: Relationship between epistemology, theory, methodology and methods (After Gray, 2014).



However, it should also be noted that, as pointed out by many scholars (e.g. Crotty, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2014a; Gray 2014), there is no distinct division between epistemologies, rather a continuum or “*gradual shading of one into the other.*” (Gray, 2014: 34). The debate about the distinction between constructionism and constructivism appears to be based on subtle differences between the perspectives (Kim, 2001). However, it is the key assumptions that they have in common, summarised in Table 4.1 (after Creswell 2009: 9) and discussed below, on which my approach is based, and which I return to later in relation to my choice of grounded theory methodology and method.

Table 4.1: Assumptions about how meaning is constructed

How meaning is constructed	How qualitative researchers explore that meaning
By individuals’ involvement in the world they inhabit.	By encouraging participants to share their views, e.g. by asking broad, open-ended questions
By individuals’ understanding of the world they engage with is shaped by historical, social and cultural influences.	By gathering information personally and in context, in order to understand the setting or context of the participants. Interpretation of findings is influenced by the researcher’s own experiences, knowledge and background.
Socially, by individuals interacting with others.	Using inductive approaches that enable the researcher to generate meaning from data that is collected in the field.

As discussed earlier, constructionists/constructivists believe that people seek answers regarding their place within their social worlds, and assign meanings to things based on their personal experiences (Creswell, 2009). As subjective meanings are varied and multiple, complexity is explored by using broad questioning. This allows participants freedom of expression and enables them to explore meaning flexibly and interactively, in the context of their own life circumstances (Creswell, 2009). Social constructivists believe these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically, as they are formed and re-formed by everyday interactions with others (thus the term social constructivism). In other words, meaning is influenced by others, and by the cultural and contextual norms that operate within families, communities and societies (Creswell 2009). Constructionists/constructivists also acknowledge and recognise their position in the research process, as I discuss later. In my own case, I will attend to how my background, experiences, and cultural norms interplay with participants' accounts and shape my interpretation.

4.2 Use of a qualitative approach

Although my scientific background and grounding in quantitative research could have led me to follow a positivist approach, my choice of approach is based on its suitability for exploring the research questions posed (Flick, 2014a). Quantitative methodology would not have facilitated the type of discovery that I aimed to achieve. Despite my background in quantitative work, I found that datasets which provide macro data on birth order and sibling status for instance, leave unanswered questions. Therefore, as I discussed in Chapter Three, it became evident when appraising the literature that a qualitative approach would best help explore the history of, and meanings attached to, sibling relationships in later life. Although macro data provide useful background information such as how often siblings contact each other, it cannot examine the quality of contact; how and why contact is maintained; or whether the effects of sibling status (gender and birth order) are modified over the life-course by variables not being measured or controlled for, such as getting

married. Moreover, of crucial importance to my study, is that although sibling status may be a useful predictor of the *effect* that having a particular sibling has on someone, it does not provide information about their sibling relationship quality. Studies which have investigated the effects of birth order, do not address older adults' sibling relationships and the absence of data on the meaning of sibling relationships amongst older adults provides a springboard for my research.

So, as outlined in my literature review in Chapters Two and Three, there is limited *a priori* research into older adult sibling relationships, and I adhere to the view expressed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) regarding the suitability of qualitative research to elicit information about subjects that have been under explored. This, and the fact that my methodological approach needed to account for the complexity of human relationships, led me to adopt a qualitative approach, defined as a means of “*exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem*” (Cresswell, 2009: 4).

Qualitative research seemed to be the most suitable way to enable me to gain understanding and to help fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge. Qualitative researchers consider how the social phenomena being investigated are experienced, generated, or understood in context (Mason, 2002). My intention to gain detailed knowledge and understanding about the meaning of sibling relationships in later life, influenced my methodological choice. I selected a qualitative approach to explore sibling interactions, and chose to employ a method of data collection and analysis which would be sensitive to the complex nature of social reality (Creswell, 2009). The literature reviewed in Chapter Three, highlighted the importance of examining the relationships between older adult siblings within the context of a life-course perspective which reflects the “*outcome of decisions, actions and circumstances in younger years*” (Connidis, 2001:14). Thus, my methodology needed to allow the complexity of changes, experiences, reflections and understanding to emerge.

I concluded in Chapter Two that quantitative methods using questionnaires and rating scales, may not have adequately captured the meaning of sibling relationships and their role in older adults' lives. This is because rather static, one dimensional accounts of a dynamic relationship have been presented. Contradictory results have arisen from correlating different dimensions of sibling relationships with one another (e.g. contact, intimacy, confiding, closeness, support, rivalry). Although quantitative findings indicate that there are associations between dimensions, they do not aid understanding as to why these associations exist. Moreover, the majority of studies consider only one participant's perspective which allows limited insight into sibling relationship dynamics, reasons for change, and responses to life-course transitions. Thus, missing from the literature is understanding of how sibling relationships change over time. The studies discussed earlier describe differences in the results between age-groups within samples, and then equate this with change. The problem with this is that different age-cohorts may have experienced different contexts. As Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010: 1056) contend, in order to gain a better understanding of the changes that happen within families as we age, we need to study "*the process of incremental change and stage-sequential transitions in family relationships and systems over time, as well as their antecedents and long-term consequences.*" Several investigators (Connidis, 1995; Neyer, 2002; Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008) demonstrate that examining sibling relationships from more than just one participant's perspective, provides more insight. However, the meaning attached to sibling relationships has not been fully explored with the quantitative data they collected.

That I seek knowledge about a time in life I have not yet experienced, further emphasises the importance of gaining insight by listening to older adults' reflections about the meaning of their sibling relationships. My aim was to do this by encouraging participants to act as a vehicle for providing knowledge and understanding about their lived experiences, and the context in which their relationships exist and arise (Gubrium and Sankar, 1994).

In conclusion, guided by the philosophical assumption of the interpretative tradition that the truth takes many forms (Clarke, 2001), qualitative methodology seemed well suited to my intention to elicit rich data about how individuals make sense of their sibling relationship(s). I also seek to explore sibling relationships from more than one perspective because, as discussed, prior research which explores them in context is rare. I felt that open, individual interviews, would allow participants' voices to be heard, and facilitate nuanced and contextual understanding by generating rich, thick descriptions.

Given the longevity of sibling relationships and the need to understand their evolution, a biographical approach to interviewing seemed particularly appropriate. Encouraging participants to reflect on their experience of sibling relationship(s) over time, should enable them to consider what past circumstances have influenced their current relationships and provide a more nuanced understanding. My aim in using a biographical approach is that it will provide some insight into some of the intellectual puzzles that appear in the literature. For instance, Gold (1987) identified that the majority of older adults in her study had positive sibling relationships, and those who didn't express regrets. However, whether the 11% of siblings in Gold's study classed as "*hostile*" were always so, and if so why they were, is not revealed. Although Connidis (1989) raises the question as to whether siblings who have not been close earlier in life are likely to become so later in life her (2007) study findings do demonstrate that sibling relationships can be re-negotiated. This is something I aim to explore further amongst older adults who are likely to have experienced life transitions that appear to be associated with enhancing sibling relationships e.g. widowhood. Thus, my aim in adopting a biographical approach was to allow older adults to talk about whether they feel their current sibling relationships are shaped by how they have experienced them over the life-course, by allowing them the freedom to reflect on the history of their sibling relationships.

I also feel that a qualitative approach is well suited to the task of exploring sibling relationships from more than one perspective. Few researchers have asked participants about more than one sibling relationship during the course of an interview. I believe that listening to multiple voices can gain more insight than selecting a specific sibling for a participant to talk about. For example, it may provide a better understanding of whether siblings look to a particular sibling for companionship or support in later life, or whether certain siblings are preferred for different things e.g. sisters compared to brothers. Furthermore, multiple accounts may reinforce views expressed about the significance of life-course transitions, influence of other relationships, or whether siblings are considered to be of life-long importance versus important only at particular times of life. In other words, it might help to pinpoint whether sibling relationships remain consistently important, or wax and wane over the life-course. Another benefit, given the age-group under study, is that the combined narratives of several siblings should provide more memories than a single account, and reinforce some beliefs, whilst contradicting others.

My next consideration centres on how to make sense of the rich contextual data generated by participants describing their experiences. As there are unanswered questions within the literature, I feel that adopting a grounded theory approach and using life-course perspective to provide a theoretical framework for the study, will enable me to discover what events and transitions participants believe have the most bearing on their sibling relationships.

4.3 A grounded theory approach

A grounded theory approach provides a means of using qualitative data inductively which has been widely utilised by researchers to construct theories that are grounded in the data itself (Bryman, 2004). Grounded theory, conceived by sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a “*systematic method of analysing and collecting data to develop middle-range theories.*” (Charmaz, 2012: 2)

Grounded theory has been adapted and modified into several versions (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007b; Flick, 2014b). In order to clarify which grounded theory approach best suited my research aims, I start by outlining the evolution of grounded theory methodology. Originally, the development of grounded theory was influenced by positivist, pragmatist and symbolic interactionist schools of thought (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007b; Flick, 2014b). One of the original intentions of its founders, Glaser and Strauss, was that grounded theory methods would “*let the data speak*” (Flick, 2014b: 557) in an uncomplicated manner. A key component of the approach is the application of coding strategies to qualitative data, not in a fixed way, but in a fluid-like way, allowing for ongoing revision (Bryman, 2004). As I will describe in Chapter Five, data collection and analysis occur in a cyclical fashion (Flick 2014a). A feature of the original grounded theory method was that data collection and analysis preceded the literature review. This was deemed to be the only way that researchers could truly demonstrate that their understanding of the data had driven theory development, rather than being influenced by existing theories arising out of prior knowledge of the subject (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Flick, 2014b). In other words, the researcher needs to show clearly that their resultant theory has arisen inductively from the data (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007a; Flick, 2014b), rather than their data being used deductively to support or refute existing theories.

However, grounded theory has, influenced by different theoretical perspectives, developed from its original form. For instance, Charmaz (2006) and others (e.g. Bryant, 2002) questioned how realistic it is to overlook the researcher’s interaction with their participants, on the data. They cast doubts on the notion that theory is discovered in the field and solely grounded in the data (Bryman 2004). Rather, they recognise the role of the researcher in deriving theories, due to the influence of their underlying position, knowledge and interactions within the research process. They draw on interpretive traditions which suggest that data is mutually constructed by researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2006; Flick,

2014a) rather than discovered as suggested by Glaser (2001, 2005). This allows for a more flexible methodological approach. In fact, Bryant and Charmaz (2007a) and also Charmaz (2008) refer to grounded theory as a family of methods. Although Charmaz originally referred to this flexible approach as constructivist grounded theory, as distinct from the original objectivist approach to grounded theory, she subsequently framed her approach “*under the more general rubric of social constructionism*” (Charmaz, 2008: 409). Although constructivist grounded theory “*assumes relativity, acknowledges standpoints, advocates reflexivity... and assumes the existence of an obdurate, real world that may be interpreted in multiple ways*”, Charmaz (2008: 409) questions the level of subjectivism. She argues that people can only show agency in terms of making their worlds, up to a point, and not as they please, because of the historical and social conditions that shape views, actions and collective practices. More recently, Charmaz (2012: 2) described grounded theory as a “*method in process*” used by researchers who hold an array of theoretical perspectives.

Like Charmaz (2006; 2008; 2012), I resolved to take a flexible approach to the application of grounded theory methodology, to offer an interpretive view of the nature of the sibling relationships I would be studying, rather than trying to present a precise representation. I wanted to allow participants’ voices to be heard whilst, at the same time, recognising that my pre-conceptions, perspectives, and attitudes are likely to influence how, and what, participants chose to tell me during their interviews. Thus, like Charmaz (2012), it was not my intention to strictly adhere to a pure grounded theory methodology but rather to modify this approach in fitting with the overall aims of my study. Allowing myself to discover where gaps and contradictions exist currently should allow me to move the dialogue along. Modifying my approach would also enable me to explore unknown territory whilst, at the same time, not losing sight of the influence of what has come before. In fact, “*doing a literature review for orientation*” (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007a: 12) has been put forward as one of several guidelines that may form a fundamental part of a more flexible grounded theory approach.

As discussed in Chapter Three, my literature review highlighted a dearth of literature aimed at understanding the meaning of such relationships, particularly from multiple perspectives. Given this conclusion, I felt that adopting a Charmazian model, which is suited to a research topic that is under explored, would assist me in representing multiple perspectives and accommodating the diversity of older adults' sibling relationships. Furthermore, it fulfilled my aim to actively engage participants in order to gain insights into the *meaning* of their experiences of both having and being siblings, rather than just asking for descriptions. This is in keeping with the aim of constructivist grounded theory to gain an interpretive understanding so that theory constructed is useful (Charmaz, 2006). As I discuss in Chapter One, I came to this research with a life-time of experiencing my own sibling relationship and of observing the sibling relationships of others. Because I was part of the interview construction, I was not distant, but present. This is also in keeping with a constructivist standpoint which demands that you reflect on what your perspective brings to the analysis. Like Charmaz (2006), I feel that being reflexive and remaining aware of existing theories and findings helps to place my research within the existing body of work.

In Chapter Five, I detail the criteria which form an integral part of the grounded theory approach that I applied to the study of older adult sibling relationships (e.g. memo writing, carrying out data collection, conducting coding and analysis concurrently). In addition, as already noted, I chose to use a life-course perspective to aid interpretation of how current sibling relationships are shaped by past context, events and life-course transitions. It is to this that I now turn.

4.4 Life-course theory

The development of a life-course perspective stems from the work of Elder (1974) as cited in Nilsen et al. (2012). Elder's longitudinal study of the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s on the life-course of individuals and families was significant. As noted by Hutchinson (2007), Elder (1974) found that the life-course trajectories of the cohort that

were young children during the Depression, were affected more adversely than those who experienced the Depression during their middle childhood/late adolescent years. A life-course approach offers a theoretical focus on the link between individual action, historical time, social/cultural, economic, and environmental influences (Elder et al., 2003). Because the life-course approach is flexible, it recognises that individuals have multiple interdependent trajectories over time (Hutchinson, 2007), that ageing involves social processes as well as psychological and biological ones, and is affected by “*cohort-historical factors*” (Phillipson, 2013: 37). Thus, taking a life-course approach to the study of later life means looking beyond an older person’s current circumstances by considering the influence of important events, experiences and transitions, within the context of family and society, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the individual (Phillipson, 2013).

The life-course perspective, with its emphasis on historical and social context, highlights how stability and change affect cohorts, and lends itself to the use of qualitative methodologies that offer in-depth examination of life histories (Bengtson and Allen, 1993). The family is a particularly important life-course influence and means of support (Antonucci and Wong, 2010). For the most part, siblings are likely to experience the same historical, social, economic, and family context. The longevity of sibling relationships means they are well suited to study using a life-course perspective with its emphasis on timing, social context, and linked lives. White (2001) used a life-course perspective to investigate whether sibling relationships are influenced by life-course-events (e.g. getting married, raising children, or establishing careers) rather than by developmental ageing processes. White (2001) postulated that when any of these life transitions are absent (e.g. for those never married) or reversed (e.g. in widowhood), siblings will become central players in people’s lives. According to White (2001; 557) a life-course perspective suggests that siblings are “*permanent, but flexible members of our social networks*”, whose roles change and adapt in the light of “*changing circumstances and competing obligations*”.

A weakness of the life-course approach is that the same events do not necessarily affect birth cohorts in the same way. Life-course theory does not address differences within cohorts due to age, sex, ethnic origin, social class, religion, and health (Setterson, 2003 cited in Hutchinson, 2007). As societal norms change over time, one birth cohort's experiences may differ from that of subsequent birth cohorts (Setterson, 2003 cited in Hutchinson, 2007). Moreover, transition patterns e.g. youth to adulthood, vary according to ethnicity, gender (MacMillan et al., 2012), and nationality (Nilsen et al., 2002). The relevance of the life-course approach to less affluent societies is also little known. In affluent societies like the UK, changes in education at one end of the life-course, and increased life expectancy at the other, have altered phases of the life-course which are socially constructed, such as work and retirement (Dannefer, 2003 cited by Hutchinson, 2007). Finally, not all life-courses follow a predictable sequence, so it does not account for individuals whose life-course presents differently, or are shorter (Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). Although flexible to a certain extent, the life-course perspective still focuses on age and stage-based transitions, which are becoming less relevant to contemporary societies.

Methodologically, there are also issues of complexity because investigating change and stability across the life-course is not straightforward (Blieszner, 2006). The diversity of social and cultural experiences, even within the same context, make it difficult to research. Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish between different influences e.g. family, school, governments, events, or the interplay between them (Dannefer, 2003 cited in Hutchinson, 2007). As argued by Blieszner (2006), it is quite a challenge to examine individual lives in the context of changing social structures. Despite these challenges, Connidis (2007) proposes that using a life-course perspective can make sibling relationships more visible and help to address the lack of viable theory to highlight if, how, and why sibling relationships are responsive in terms of support and influence.

In terms of framing my own study within a life-course perspective, given that the literature suggests that sibling relationships change with age, I felt that ignoring past influences and life events on those changes would render the study of older adults' sibling relationships incomplete. Furthermore, older adults and their siblings will have lived through a changing social landscape and therefore be able to gain insight into whether they feel that this has impacted on how their sibling relationships evolved, and how they interact with each other now. Having chosen grounded theory and life-course theory as pertinent approaches, it was then vital to choose an appropriate research tool. Open interviews, taking into account individual biographies, seemed well suited, as I explain below.

4.5 Biographical interviews

Biographical research encompasses a variety of different approaches including, for example life history, personal narratives, and oral history. Regardless of their method, their core aim is to seek to gain a wider understanding of the lived experience of growing older (Roberts, 2002). As noted by Kaplan (2014), biographical methods originate from Thomas and Znaniecki's (1927) landmark study, 'The Polish Peasant in Europe', which includes a biography of Waldeck, a Polish migrant. Elder's (1974) study – about the formative experience of being a child at the time of the Great Depression – emphasised the usefulness of the method and, by the 1980s, biographical methods were established approaches in a variety of disciplines to examine the lived experiences of people. In the UK, Johnson (1976) was the first to recognise that biographical methods could move social gerontological research on from focussing on commonalities of later life to researching older adults' uniqueness and differences, as well as attempting to understand their concerns and preferences. He realised that ageing and old age needed to be examined in a way that allowed them to be understood as processes which evolve over the life-course, and are shaped by transitions (e.g. family, education, work, hobbies) rather than being finite stages, reached abruptly. As noted by Bron and Thunborg (2015), biographical research

approaches are useful methods for uncovering individual stories and experiences of everyday life. They have the benefit of providing the researcher with rich material to analyse, and of enabling participants to learn about themselves by reflecting on their own life experience.

There are debates within the literature about whether life story interviews should encourage participants to narrate an uninterrupted life story – which is followed by questions about the narrative and then by topic specific questions – or if they should employ a thematic focus from the outset (see Rosenthal, 2004). I adopted the latter approach because, as Rosenthal (2004) notes, it is possible to take a life story approach whilst also being clear about the research topic. My focus allowed participants to freely recall their sibling relationships in the context of their own life story. Thus, my approach encouraged participants to reveal and reflect on what their sibling relationships meant to them over the life-course and why, in order to understand how their sibling relationships have been influenced by multiple biographical strands.

Conducting open-ended individual interviews in order to gain personal accounts seems justified given the exploratory nature of my research. Given the potential diversity and complexity of sibling relationships, and my aim to widen understanding, it was important to take an approach that permitted flexibility, allowing emergent themes to be explored during the interviews. This would enable participants to educate me and widen my understanding in an interactive way. I wanted participants to explore their sibling relationships, voice opinions in their own words, and not be led by pre-conceived forms of questioning. Thus: *“placing personal history or biography at the heart of a life course approach creates a context for better understanding current circumstances.”* (Blieszner and Bedford, 2012: 39).

Alternative methods e.g. focus groups, would not gain the same in-depth understanding of personal experiences (Bryman, 2012), and may have been difficult for some older adults to engage in. Furthermore, given the number of participants that were known to each other, it would not have been possible to maintain sensitivity and confidentiality, and to allow

everyone's voices to be heard in the same way. Central to a biographical approach are methods that allow researchers to engage in the research process in order to explore *with* participants "*how they make sense of their worlds*" (Merrill and West, 2009:4). Thus, personal narratives can help illuminate quantitative data, because they reveal diverse and complex sets of circumstances in the lives of older adults. Biographical methods also encourage participants to look forward to the future – as well as recollecting the past – which, as will be discussed in Chapter Ten, has important implications for policy and practice.

Merrill and West (2009:5) explain how the researcher's own role is highlighted by use of the term auto/biography to describe: "*the inter-relationship between the construction of our own lives through autobiography and the construction of others' lives through biography.*" As Merrill and West (2009) also emphasise, it is difficult to write about participants' lives without considering our own context and subjective experiences. Furthermore, as I outlined in Chapter One, the choice of a research topic for study is often influenced by personal as well as professional interest. Thus, our motivation for choosing a particular topic can provide a case for positioning the researcher within the research frame. Those using a biographical lens should interrogate their position: "*explicitly - rather than pretending...that our interests and ways of making sense to others is or should be divorced from the people and experiences we are researching.*" (Merrill and West, 2009:5).

Biographical research facilitates the gathering of detailed accounts which can be used to explore the relationship between macro and micro influences on change (Merrill and West, 2009). Including historical and contextual information facilitates a stronger understanding than exploring issues in the absence of wider context. Johnson (1976) was one of the first people to engage with biographical approaches to gerontological research in the UK. As discussed, Johnson (1976) recognised the value of understanding older adults' past experiences and became an early advocate in the use of a biographical approach. He emphasises that it is only through understanding an older adult's lived experiences, and

elements of their life story that they consider to be important, that we begin to appropriately identify their preferences. This also seems to be the case for sibling relationships. It is through understanding what siblings have experienced during the lifetime of their relationship that insight may be gained into what it means to them now. By enabling older adults to talk about sibling relationships in the context of their whole life, I hope, as Johnson (1976) intended, to move away from reliance on assessment tools aimed at either classifying sibling types or identifying needs and dependency and, instead, gain insight into meanings and preferences. Because of my intention to explore participants' sibling relationships over the life-course, interviews of a biographical nature would also enable the following influences to be investigated:

- The influence of participants' experience of growing up with their siblings in the context of their family, extended family and community;
- The influence of other family and personal relationships;
- How sibling relationships were maintained once siblings no longer lived together;
- Which life events and transitions were considered influential; and
- The meaning and importance of sibling relationships in participants' everyday lives.

Due to my aim to interview as many members of each sibling group as were willing or able to participate, I felt it was important to consider the feasibility of using telephone or Skype interviews if sibling groups were geographically dispersed. Irvine et al. (2010) describe the advantages of telephone interviews as: reducing travel time and costs; giving participants a degree of anonymity; feeling less intrusive; and making researchers and participants feel safer physically and more relaxed. In fact, so many families were significantly dispersed that I would not have been able to include many of them if I had limited my approach to face-to-face interviews alone (see Chapter Six). When comparing the quality of face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews, Irvine et al. (2010) found that those interviewed by telephone covered the research questions and digressed less. They also report that telephone interviews were wrapped up more quickly than face-to-face interviews. Concerns

about the suitability of telephone interviews for qualitative research centre on the belief that this approach may restrict researchers' ability to establish rapport and uncover meaning, because of the lack of visual cues. However, Irvine et al. (2010: 1) conclude that "*concerns about rapport or loss of meaning are somewhat exaggerated or unfounded*" because they found little evidence to substantiate such concerns. As discussed further in Chapter Five, I felt that the likely benefits of interviewing complete sibling groups might outweigh any drawbacks, something I explored further during my pilot study (see page 103).

4.6 My position in the research process

As discussed above, and within my introductory chapter, considering my position within the research process forms an important part of the qualitative research process (Silverman, 2010). Discourse between researcher and research participants can be modified by gender, power balance, culture and diversity (Green et al., 2007). The influence and relative advantages/disadvantages of being an "*insider*" (belonging to the group being researched) or an "*outsider*" are discussed in the literature (e.g. Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012). Some of the many arguments and counter arguments as to the value of insider versus outsider research (e.g. Kahuna, 2000; Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012) are summarised in Table 4.2. Being too close to the subject, or alternatively being too distanced, raise issues regarding relative objectivity/subjectivity, reflexivity and authenticity (Kahuna, 2000). Furthermore, that researchers hold multiple positions emphasises the importance of remaining reflexive during the research process, and challenges the notion that insider versus outsider can be presented as a dichotomy (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Describing a researcher as either in or out is restrictive, when in reality there are degrees of similarities and differences (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012). It is rare for a researcher to be completely an insider or an outsider, and some identities can change e.g. marital status, whereas others e.g. race and gender, are usually fixed (Kerstetter, 2012). This forms the basis for the argument that most

researchers are likely to fall somewhere between an insider or an outsider, depending on the nature of their research. The important point is that researchers recognise where they are positioned within this space and its effect on the research process and outcomes.

Table 4.2: Comparison of different research positions (after Kerstetter, 2012)

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Insider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher is uniquely positioned to understand the experiences that they also share • Researcher finds it easier to engage research participants • Participants may better accept and open up to a researcher who shares their status (trust and openness easier to establish based on commonality) • There may be greater depth of data gathered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjectivity means researcher cannot analyse clearly because they are too close to the subject • They may reflect on their own personal experience too much • They may overlook potential bias and assume similarity, thus overlooking differences • The dual role of researcher and member of the group being studied may become difficult • Researcher is emotionally close
Outsider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objectivity seen as the ability of a stranger to see things clearly • They are emotionally distanced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability too clearly analyse something that the researcher is not a part of • They may find it difficult to engage with participants • Participants may feel that the researcher cannot appreciate their experiences

I identified myself as both an insider and an outsider. From an insider perspective, I have a sibling relationship which has been shaped by my family background, life events and transitions. Through my close personal and family relationships, I have knowledge and understanding of other sibling relationships, which I have reflected on, and been reminded of when undertaking this study. All of the participants in my study were White and have full biological siblings which provides a shared context. However, because I am younger than my participants, I am also an outsider. I have yet to experience the circumstances that bring siblings closer together later in life e.g. loss of parents, loss of a spouse, retirement. As outlined in Chapter One, I have an insider perspective in terms of being an older sister to a

younger brother, but no experience of having a sister, or more than one sibling. The argument outlined above that no researcher is completely insider or outsider, explains why I identified more with sibling groups with whom I shared common ground, something I recorded in my fieldnotes (Appendix Twelve). It is recommended practice that researchers attempt to remain objective about the effect of shared personal experiences on the research process, whilst recognising that insider knowledge can have the positive effect of enhancing understanding (Kahuna, 2000). As I will discuss further in Chapter Five keeping a fieldnote journal is a recommended method of good practice aimed at reducing bias (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

4.7 Approaches to checking the quality of the research

A limitation of qualitative research is the lack of generalisability, because the small samples used to generate detailed data do not lend themselves to being verified objectively using traditional means of quantitative researchers such as reliability and validity (Mason, 2002; Bryman, 2004). Although reliability and validity are “*important criteria in establishing and assessing the quality of research for the quantitative researcher*” (Bryman, 2004: 292), their relevance for qualitative research has been subject to debate (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2010). Silverman suggests that the focus for qualitative research should be on examining validity (or truth) rather than reliability (or consistency). As outlined by Flick (2014a: 483) “*the question of validity boils down to... whether the researchers see in fact what they think they see.*” Flick (2014a) outlines errors in validity as being: the false or inaccurate identification of relationships; not identifying relationships that are there; or asking the wrong questions to begin with. By its very nature, qualitative research produces detailed, complex, contextually relevant data, rendering examination of reliability less relevant (Bryman, 2004). Debate within the literature regarding how to address the validity of qualitative research centres on the degree to which qualitative researchers modify criteria adopted from quantitative research (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982) or redevelop them (Guba and Lincoln,

1994). Bryman (2004) suggests that the majority of qualitative researchers sit in the middle of the realism axis, believing that their accounts are not definitive, but one of a number of possible explanations.

Alternative criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research are trustworthiness and authenticity. The former is comprised of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Transferability is established through the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973) of methods and findings by providing detailed information about participants, location, methods, my role in the study, and contextual information regarding the time and place in which participants sibling relationships arose. For instance, I draw attention to unique contextual circumstances such as family structures, and reasons for disruptions to participants' family life to enable others to judge whether my findings are transferrable to other situations. Credibility is established through the use of respondent validation and triangulation (Bryman, 2004); dependability by applying an auditing approach, such as examining coding consistency in interview transcripts (Bryman, 2004); and confirmability by demonstrating that the researcher has acted in good faith e.g. by being transparent and open through the use of journals and fieldnotes during the research process (Bryman, 2004, Flick, 2014a).

However, Silverman (2010) argues that triangulation and respondent validation are not infallible and suggests that the following help researchers achieve validity:

- Questioning assumptions about the relationship between phenomena (refutability principle).
- Finding another case on which to test findings (constant comparative method).
- Being inclusive rather than selective with data (comprehensive data treatment).
- Carefully analysing outliers (deviant case analysis).
- Using appropriate tabulations.

Although grounded theory approaches are not immune to the issues of quality discussed above, such as incorrect interpretation of data producing inaccurate theory, they do have the advantage of an inbuilt checking process through the use of constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. This inbuilt mechanism for checking the coding and analysis within the process is different to other qualitative methods where checking occurs at the end of the process. According to Elliot and Lazenbatt (2005: 51):

“the progressive nature of theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis suggests that the researcher moves on to involve other groups or people who have different experiences to see if the findings hold as new data is collected.”

These authors argue against the use of respondent validation because it generates additional data and its effectiveness has been challenged. Furthermore, as is the case in my study, it could not be achieved without breaching confidentiality as study participants are known to each other. Another inbuilt device that can assist data quality checking is the use of memos which, as will be discussed in Chapter Five (page 128), help to address the issue of subjectivity because they alert the researcher to their personal biases and introduce an additional layer of checking emergent theory. Thus, the use of memos as part of a grounded theory approach, as explained by Elliot and Lazenbatt (2005), serve two purposes: in addition to becoming part of the data analysis, they counter subjectivity and, in this respect, improve the chances of accuracy. Thus, in addition to employing the data validation strategies suggested by Silverman (2010), I used methods that are integral to grounded theory approaches such as concurrent data collection, constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and memos (see Chapter Five, pages 113-133). Hadley (2015) also makes the point that the use of carefully applied ethical process, which includes paying careful attention, showing empathy, understanding the context, being open, honest and reflective can enhance the validity of qualitative research.

4.8 Ethical Principles

In adopting the following ethical principles I was guided by advice provided by the British Society of Gerontology (2012) and the British Sociological Association (2004). I outline the principles that I adhered to here, and give further details of how I implemented ethical practice throughout the study in Chapter Five (pages 97-99). The guidelines issued by both societies emphasise the importance of principles which are concerned with minimising risk to both participants and researchers; conducting the research in a confidential manner; and adhering to principles of trustworthiness. I was conscious of the need to minimise risk throughout the study. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic for some participants, it was important that the interview process did not cause distress, become intrusive, or affect their sibling relationships. As will be discussed further in Chapter Five, part of the process of minimising risks to participants involves ensuring that they are prepared for what taking part entails, and understand that they can decline to answer questions that they are not comfortable with, or withdraw from the study at any time. Adhering to the principle of confidentiality is particularly critical because participants from each family know each other, which may potentially increase the risk of harming participants' sibling relationships if data is not handled carefully and confidentially. I recognised the need to be sensitive during the process of disseminating information about the study to potential volunteers and the importance of trustworthiness. Information about the study needed to be given in an honest and transparent manner, outlining the benefits, risks and how the research would be conducted, clearly. Volunteers needed to feel safe and secure, and trust in me, as a researcher, to do the research in the right way, and I in return needed to ensure that I am worthy of that trust, as I will explain in Chapter Five.

4.9 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have discussed my methodological and theoretical approaches, my rationale for identifying why a qualitative approach suited my research aims, and outlined why I chose life-course theory to frame my study and chose to adopt a grounded theory approach. I outlined that open biographical interviews would best facilitate exploration of sibling relationships and importantly help to identify how past context influenced current relationships. As data generated from open interviews is detailed and in depth, I considered validity, and the effect of my position on the generation and interpretation of data. I also introduced the ethical principles which will be continually addressed throughout the study and discussed the challenges of working with participants who were known to each other. In the following Chapter, I discuss recruitment and selection, ethics in practice, the pilot study, and my data collection and analysis processes.

Chapter Five: Methods

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the study design, the process of gaining ethical approval, recruitment and selection, and issues that arose during the pilot study. Next, I outline the data collection, transcription, coding and analysis processes. Finally, I discuss the issue of theoretical sampling and knowing when to exit the field.

As outlined in Chapter Four, asking multiple members of the same sibling group about the nature of their sibling relationships currently, and over the life-course, warrants the use of open, flexible biographical interviews. To this end I produced an interview guide, based on broad areas that I wanted to invite participants to explore, which includes prompts that might be useful along the way (Appendix One). As discussed below, an important part of the process was gaining ethical consent from Keele University Research Ethics Committee. Therefore, I developed and submitted the relevant documentation for approval (Appendix Two). Once ethical approval was gained (Appendix Three), I carried out a pilot study to test my research tools and methods ahead of the main study.

5.1 Research ethics

In gaining ethical approval for the study, I was guided by Keele University Research Governance procedures, which define ethics as: *“to respect the dignity and rights of participants and ensure their safety and well-being (e.g. by having robust procedures in place for obtaining valid informed consent, and protecting private or confidential data).”* (<https://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchgovernance/researchethics/>)

Prior to the study, I underwent a DBS check (Appendix Four) to confirm my suitability for research with older (potentially vulnerable) adults. Having an awareness of, and following the guidelines during the process of seeking voluntary participants, was not the sum total

of my ethical practice. Protecting research participants from harm involves developing trust, protecting confidentiality, maintaining integrity, guarding against unethical practice, responding appropriately and sensitively to problems, and ensuring that findings are reported accurately (Cresswell, 2009), and applied to all phases of the research process from recruitment to dissemination of findings.

To establish trust and ensure that participants felt safe and valued throughout the research process, I provided written information about the aims of the study and what participation would involve (Appendix Two). I also re-iterated the information verbally when scheduling interviews, and again just before each interview. I emphasised to each participant their right to withdraw at any time and that they had the right to stop the interview, should the need arise. I explained how I would maintain anonymity, and reassured them that I would not disclose anything mentioned to me during their interview to any of their family members. I was mindful to ensure that their relationships were not adversely affected by study participation.

Once we had discussed the study, participants' consent to be interviewed was sought, along with consent to use quotable material, which I explained would be anonymised (see Appendix Two). Ensuring that consent is informed and voluntary is an important principle that I adhered to in order to ensure that individuals did not feel pressurised to take part (Gregory, 2003). Because of the nature of my study design, it was important to ensure that individuals did not feel obliged to take part because their sibling wanted them to. Although my connection to each sibling group was initially gained via the first sibling to volunteer, I double checked that each individual sibling who was put forward genuinely wanted to participate. To this end, every sibling was sent their own letter and information sheet and treated individually (Appendix Two). I made no assumptions that volunteers had gained

accurate knowledge about participation from their siblings. I felt confident that I addressed the issue of being volunteered, rather than volunteering, because some volunteers voiced concerns or misunderstandings about participating when I contacted them directly. Sometimes they needed clarification about processes and were willing to proceed, but sometimes they were not genuine volunteers and so withdrew.

That some participants knew each other added complexity in terms of confidentiality, which I addressed by emphasising that I would not discuss anything that one sibling had said with another. Maintaining confidentiality during the interviews was not as difficult as I had anticipated, but writing up was, as I will discuss further in Chapter Ten. Anonymity was built in from the beginning during transcription. However, despite using pseudonyms for the participants and people that they talked about I also found it necessary to avoid, when writing up my findings, including details that might inadvertently identify participants. In order to comply with data protection, personal information has been stored securely on the University server and password protected, and hard copy material stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. Recorded interviews were deleted from the digital recorder following transcription. I have been mindful of the need to avoid harm in other ways. For instance, some of my participants care for family members or have health problems. To avoid unduly burdening them I emphasised that their interview could be stopped, paused, or cancelled, and was responsive to requests to re-schedule interviews. I allowed participants to choose where the interview would take place. I made it clear that the interviews would be recorded, and always mentioned when the recorder was about to be turned on and off. I thanked participants for taking part and having informed them of my anticipated submission data, that I will write to them at the end of the study, to thank them, and to outline my main findings.

5.2 Recruitment and selection

As discussed earlier, a qualitative approach was undertaken, which was cross-sectional in nature and involved collecting data from participants at the same point in time (Bryman, 2004) in order to elicit retrospective accounts of their sibling relationships over the life-course. The aim was to examine sibling relationships from the perspective of adults aged over 70, an age when the relationship appears to take on new meaning (e.g. Gold, 1987; Smith, 2002). As discussed, much existing research into the adult sibling relationship examines one viewpoint about a single sibling relationship (see Chapter Two, pages 38-44), whereas I interviewed multiple siblings from the same family in order to uncover complexity and highlight consensus, contradiction, and the interdependency that exists between family relationships (Connidis, 2007). Because individuals often have a good understanding of the dynamics of other family relationships (Allan et al., 2011), a multi-perspective approach should provide a rounded picture of sibling relationships (Mauthner, 2000; Harden et al., 2010), and understanding of whether sibling relationships are re-negotiated over the life-course.

As detailed in the invitation letters (Appendix Two), the aim of recruitment was to obtain a purposive sample of older adults aged over 70 and any of their siblings who were willing and eligible to take part in an individual in-depth interview. Eligible participants needed to have at least one living sibling, and those who expressed interest were asked to pass on invitation letters to their siblings. Although siblings are often defined as full biological siblings, I emphasised that half or step siblings who participants consider to be siblings were eligible, because years of shared life may be important, and diverse family types are more common today. Although families where all siblings agree to participate were preferred, a flexible approach was taken, for instance including incomplete sibling groups if practical issues impeded participation of every sibling. This was necessary given that participants were older adults, some of whom had physical health problems or caring duties that made

participation difficult. Given the exploratory, concept building research aims, non-random (purposive) sampling was used, “so that those sampled are relevant to the research question”. (Bryman, 2012: 418). Because the sample was chosen to elicit meaning and experience, detailed information was gathered from a small number of participants (Arber, 2001).

Recruitment took place in three phases. In order to ensure that participants were specific to the research being conducted, I took a targeted approach initially. Thus, during the *first phase*, my PhD supervisors introduced me to representatives of local organisations who willingly allowed me to speak at several local forums aimed at older adults (see Appendix Five), and/or circulate details of my research via their newsletters or mailing lists (Appendix Six). e.g. Newcastle-under-Lyme 50 Plus Forum, The Beth Johnson Foundation, and The Ages and Stages Company. Through my own professional contacts, details of my research were posted to an alumni group comprised of adults aged 70 and over (Appendix Six). This phase of recruitment took place between May and August 2015. During the *second phase*, I contacted managers of several local retirement villages, who acted as gatekeepers. I met with them to outline the aims and purpose of my study and left information sheets and invitations to participate. They agreed to seek permission from interested residents for me to make direct contact in order to discuss the study further. This phase took place between August and September 2015. The *final phase* began in September 2015 and was less targeted. I wrote articles that appeared in local community and parish newsletters and sought permission to display advertising posters on local Church and Community noticeboards that I knew served an older adult population (Appendix Nine). Finally, I was interviewed on local radio (Appendix Eight). I also encouraged contacts that I made during recruitment to share details about the study with other people that they felt might be suitable and/or interested (snowball technique), and I approached older adults opportunistically in situations where I felt it was appropriate e.g. at school, or church groups.

As is the case with theoretical sampling, I was unable to specify beforehand precisely how many participants would be required to explore the topic. I aimed to recruit sibling groups from different backgrounds and family structures to gain a diverse sample in terms gender balance, socio-economic status, ethnic background, sibling group size and sibling type. As detailed in Chapter Six, my final sample consisted of 35 participants from 11 sibling groups. I concurrently interviewed, coded and analysed my data in order to collect data until theoretical saturation was reached and which receives further attention below (pages 108-109).

5.3 Pilot study

Prior to the main study, I conducted a pilot study to ascertain whether recruitment material enabled participants to give fully informed consent, to test technical processes for recording interviews, to evaluate the interview guide, and as discussed earlier to explore whether telephone interviews were a suitable alternative to face-to-face interviews for sibling groups who were dispersed. I critiqued and improved my interview techniques through lessons learnt during the pilot and identified solutions to problems, as discussed below. In addition, I established my processes for transcribing, data storage, processing, coding, and analysis.

Three volunteers took part in the pilot study. Later, following discussion with my PhD supervisors, it was decided to include the pilot interviews in the main study because no major changes in data collection resulted from the pilot study. Including the pilot participants also had the benefit of not having to withdraw their sibling groups from the study. Originally, four participants from two different sibling groups were scheduled to take part in the pilot study but, due to illness, one interview was postponed. In summary, three pilot interviews took place, two via telephone and one face-to-face. Lessons were learnt during the pilot study and some changes implemented:

- A short introductory telephone call was added into the process. This alerted me to potential problems such as illness, provided an opportunity to remind interviewees about what to expect during the interview process, and put myself and participants more at ease the following day.
- At the suggestion of the pilot interviewees, I emphasised that interviews were not follow-on interviews from their siblings who went before, but independent accounts from each person's perspective.
- The pilot study participants sometimes omitted information from the data collection form (Appendix Seven) that they assumed I had gained from another sibling. During the course of the main study, checking the form prior to each interview beginning became part of my introductory process.
- I built flexibility into the interview schedule, allowing family groups to overlap, in order to allow for interviews being postponed.
- I realised that the lack of visual cues during telephone interviews meant that it was difficult to tell if a participant was becoming upset, distracted or tired and that silences were difficult to interpret. Therefore, this was something I openly discussed with participants at the beginning of all telephone interviews.
- For telephone and Skype interviews, I agreed with participants what we would do if the call dropped out, to ensure that they were not trying to call me while I was redialling them.
- Having realised that other people might be present during face-to-face interviews, because older people might need the security of a family member present, I felt it was best to discuss what approach to take on an individual basis.
- I decided to ask permission to make notes when participants talked about relevant issues after the recorder was switched off, as valuable comments were made at the door, whilst showing me photographs, or for telephone interviews, just as the call was about to end.

In terms of my participation in the interviews, my important moral code to leave the relationships as I'd found them, on reflection, made me overly cautious during the first two pilot interviews. Knowledge gained in one sibling's interview, led to me not probing enough in another. It was important to get the right balance between exploring sibling relationships enough, whilst maintaining confidentiality. I subsequently adopted a strategy of probing, asking questions, or responding to curiosity in a general way by drawing on knowledge gained in interviews with other sibling groups, or the literature, rather than participants' own siblings. It was important to the process that although I was aware of what had arisen during one sibling's interview, I did not acknowledge what I knew, or did not know, during subsequent interviews with siblings from the same family. As well as this approach being an important part of maintaining confidentiality, it also ensured that I truly gained more than one perspective. Finally, I identified that asking participants about "*childhood memories*" of their siblings was unhelpful and that "*growing up together*" worked better. It evoked memories of shared home-life, holidays, outings, and hobbies and participants who had greater memories of a siblingship established during their teenage years were not vainly searching for earlier memories of time spent with siblings in early childhood. As discussed earlier, appealing for volunteers was ongoing during the time that I was conducting the pilot study. An outline of overall recruitment phases is provided below.

5.4 Response to recruitment

Within a couple of weeks of recruitment beginning, I had positive responses to all of the approaches that I'd used, to varying degrees. I continued to recruit to the study because there were no guarantees that volunteers' siblings would want to take part, nor when theoretical saturation might be reached. Thus, I simultaneously followed up volunteers, while implementing the next phase of recruitment. As show in Table 5.1, local radio, local retirement villages, and an alumni mailing list were particularly successful.

Table 5.1: Recruitment source of volunteers and participants.

Source of contact	Number of initial contacts per source	Number of families interviewed per source
Personal network	1	1
Local Radio	4	2
Local older adults group	1	1
Over 70s alumni group	12	4
Academic event	1	0
Snowball	1	1
Community noticeboards	2	1
Gate keepers	4	1
Community event	1	0
Independent living co-ordinator saw advert in local community magazine	1	1
Total	28	12

Through the 28 people who initially contacted me, I had 67 potential volunteers to follow up (and that did not include all of their siblings). I was surprised at how many older adults contacted me via e-mail. Of the original 28 contacts, 16 were via e-mail, 5 were by phone, and 2 were in person. I contacted the remaining 5 after a gatekeeper gained permission for me to make contact. Initially, having 28 potential families to work with created concern that my sample would be too large for me to manage as a lone researcher. However, around fifty percent of the initial families withdrew, or did not meet the study criteria. Details of why volunteers were not able to participate in the study are summarised in Table 5.2 below (note that some people fit into more than one category). Ill-health of some of the volunteers, their siblings, or a sibling's spouse, commonly prevented families from participating in the study. Also, some volunteers wrongly assumed that their siblings would willingly participate.

Table 5.2: Reasons for non-participation

Reason for non-participation	Details	Number of people
Ineligible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No living siblings • Wanted to talk about other family relationships • Withdrawn (age criteria not met as oldest sibling declined to take part) 	3 2 2
Personal or health problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious illness or bereavement • Siblings not able to participate due to chronic ill health • Siblings caring duties too intense 	5 3 3
Not comfortable or able to be interviewed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrew once they understood it was an interview not questionnaire • Hearing/speech problems prohibitive • Sibling had learning difficulties 	2 3 1
Sibling who was volunteered did not really want to participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers' siblings were suspicious about the process • A daughter volunteered her mother and aunt, but her aunt did not actually want to take part • Volunteers' siblings did not want to talk about their relationships as they were estranged 	3 2 2
Gatekeeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gatekeeper denied access to a sibling perceived to be too busy with work or caring duties 	2
Could not fit interview in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt too busy to take part once I tried to schedule the interview 	2
Lost to contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail volunteers who were unresponsive to my replies and provided no other means of contact 	2
Total reasons		37

As the family portraits in Chapter Six reveal I did not interview complete sets of siblings for two of the eleven sibling groups. In one of these families I was not given direct access to four non-participating siblings because one sibling was too ill to participate; another was vulnerable; and another was caring for an ill spouse. The fourth sibling was “*not allowed*” and might not “*tell it all properly*”. Although I continued to ask for access to this sibling it was not forthcoming.

In the second family, my initial volunteer felt confident that the entire sibling group wanted to participate, following a group discussion about the study. However, I struggled to get any response from one sibling, and another returned their consent form but failed to respond when I tried to schedule their interview. Although my initial volunteer still seemed confident

that these two siblings wanted to participate, and agreed to follow this up, a different sibling informed me that they were worried about participating due to health problems that made concentrating and communicating difficult. At this point, I was wary of not putting pressure on them, and felt it was not ethical to pursue this any further.

5.5 Data collection

Once participants had read the information and returned their consent forms, I contacted them to schedule their interviews. Prior to each interview, participants provided background data, which was based on factors that the literature suggests have a bearing on adult sibling relationships, such as marital status and geographical proximity (see Appendix Seven). Data collection forms were returned to me prior to the interviews, along with consent forms. As discussed earlier, in addition to making me more familiar with each sibling groups' characteristics, discussing the data collection form served as an ice-breaker. Before proceeding with each interview, I verbally re-checked consent to participate and for the interview to be recorded.

I decided to conduct open interviews in order to allow participants to explore their sibling relationships during the course of a flexible, individual interview. At the beginning of the interview I explained that it was flexible and encouraged participants to tell me about anything they felt was important to their sibling relationship in their own order of preference. All but one participant chose a chronological approach, although in reality participants' accounts jumped around in time. The participant who preferred to highlight specific events first, did not want their importance to be lost by recounting them within a chronologically structured narrative.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the opening question of my biographical approach asked participants to reflect on the nature of their sibling relationships over the life-course. I encouraged participants to give an account of their experiences in which their narratives were structured freely, according to criteria they found relevant. I included prompts to encourage elaboration when required (Appendix One). In setting out to support participants to tell their stories I kept prompting to a minimum and asked questions which focussed on my areas of interest later in the interview. Throughout the interviews I employed strategies such as active listening, avoided unnecessary interruptions, and allowed participants time to pause and think whilst telling their story. I encouraged them by maintaining eye contact, being attentive, nodding my head, and using utterances such as 'mmm' and 'yes'. However, because some participants felt apprehensive about talking about their sibling relationship across the life-course without guidance, I could not always limit my involvement to motivational expressions or encouraging body language. Thus, whilst some participants were articulate narrators, a few were not able to talk at length and/or asked me questions during their interview and so required careful guidance. At one end of the spectrum were those who relished the opportunity provided by the interview process to reflect on their sibling relationships in a manner akin to producing a 'memoir' whilst, at the other end, were those who struggled to navigate their way through their own memories. However, I felt that being less articulate and fluent should not prohibit participants from relating their story, despite it inevitably leading to me working harder to keep the interview going.

At the end of each interview, I summarised the main points and gave participants the opportunity to add anything further, and to ask questions. I emphasised that consent to participate was an ongoing process, informed each participant of the study timescales, and ensured that each participant knew how to contact me if they had anything they wanted to ask at a later date.

In addition to demographic and interview data, field notes were recorded. A triangulation of these three data sources enabled me to gain better contextual understanding about the participants' social situation and family context. One of the benefits of interviewing siblings from the same family was that it provided several sources of information. Participants accounts about themselves and each other, and also about non-participating siblings, parents and extended family members helped to provide a more complete picture of the family as a whole. Pen portraits of each family derived from the data (interviews, data collection form, and field notes) are included in Chapter Six and individual pen portraits have also been included in Appendix Fifteen. Also included in Appendix Ten, are some examples of my reflections on the interviews.

Between September 2015 and February 2016, I conducted twelve face-to-face interviews with participants who lived within a reasonable travelling time of Keele and who were willing to be interviewed face-to-face. Eleven took place in the participant's own home, and one in a neutral setting at the participant's request. During the same time period I interviewed twenty participants via telephone and three via Skype. These participants could not be interviewed in person because of where they lived or sometimes because they had commitments which made scheduling a face-to-face interview difficult. Because I used three different modes of interviewing, I reflected on the pros and cons of face-to-face versus telephone interviews. Skype, as one participant voiced it, presented a "*nice halfway house*".

The differences/similarities between telephone, skype and face-to-face interviews were:

- There were no differences in recording quality by mode of interview.
- The length of all types of interview varied considerably.
- The lack of visual cues during the telephone interviews made it difficult to tell what silences meant, creating potential for me to mis-interpret pauses for thought.
- Face-to-face interviews felt more relaxed, particularly at the beginning.

- It was easier to gauge emotion in the face-to-face interviews.
- It was not possible to tell if telephone interviewees were dealing with any distractions, or even if they were alone.
- Skype interviews were off putting compared to telephone interviews if interviewees moved around a lot, or conversely if their image froze on the screen.
- It was easier to take notes during telephone interviews, without seeming rude.
- Telephone/skype interviews felt less intrusive and raised no concerns about safety.
- Telephone/skype interviews were more convenient.
- There were occasionally technical problems with telephone/skype interviews.
- I found telephone interviews more tiring because they required greater concentration.

As shown in Table 5.3, female participants gave longer recorded interviews compared to men, for all modes of interview. However, there was variation and the shortest interview was a face-to-face interview with a female participant and the longest with a male participant via Skype. However, when the total time spent discussing the data collection form, talking before the interview, and debriefing after the interview is taken into account, the longest time I spent with participants who I interviewed face-to-face was three hours (for three interviews) compared to the longest phone/Skype interviews which were just over two hours (for six interviews).

Table 5.3: Length of interview by mode and gender

Interview Mode	Average length of recorded interview (mins)		
	Female participants	Male participants	All
In Person	50.81	32.97	43.16
Via telephone	39.43	34.28	37.63
Via Skype	51.42	51.01	51.14
All modes	44.11	35.99	40.82

However, the amount of recorded interview material does not necessarily reflect the quality of the interview. Some participants focussed, digressed little and repeated themselves less. I do not believe that telephone interviews were of poorer quality than face-to-face interviews. In all types of interview there were participants who gave brief responses and required prompting to elaborate. Conversely, in all types of interviews there were participants who interviewed quite naturally, with little prompting. In addition, those who did not live alone, worried about being overheard, irrespective of whether the interview took place over the phone or in person. All interview types were subject to minor disruptions. For instance, visitors arrived during three face-to-face interviews, and calls dropped out during one skype and one telephone interview, meaning that a quick recap had to be undertaken before continuing the interview. There are other complexities, beyond the scope of my discussion here, that may have affected the duration of interviews. Some participants chose telephone interviews because of time pressures that made committing to a face-to-face interview difficult. For example, several participants chose to be interviewed between returning home from work and beginning caring duties, and indicated that their interviews might be cut short.

As discussed in Chapter Four, telephone interviews allowed me to interview participants who were geographically distant, or who felt that a face-to-face interview would be too inconvenient. I felt that some of my participants felt more at ease with being interviewed over the telephone because they felt uncomfortable with “hosting” a stranger due to infirmity, particularly if they lived alone. Like Irvine et al. (2010) I noted that my telephone interviews generally concluded more quickly than face-to-face interviews, perhaps because they did not allow for those final thoughts that happened in face-to-face interviews as I was being shown out. In addition, in my study, those I interviewed at home tended to ask me if I wanted to look at photographs at the end of the interview, which prompted additional thoughts, and was something that was clearly missing from telephone/skype interviews. However, adding a final comment as we were about to end the call also tended to happen. Although two

interviewees who needed the most encouragement to elaborate were conducted via telephone, conversely, some of the longest interviews were also telephone interviews. In fact, three telephone interviews were difficult to bring to a conclusion. Overall, participants did answer the questions that I asked. Although I gained a sense that some people interviewed better over the telephone than others, I cannot say that they would have interviewed better face-to-face.

5.6 Limitations of the sample

My original aim, to recruit a diverse sample was achieved with regard to sibling group size, gender balance, age spacing, geographical dispersion, and socio-economic and educational background. Interviewees' current personal circumstances are also diverse. For example, some interviewees live alone with little family nearby; some are married and have siblings and adult children nearby; and some, despite their geographical distance from family members, are embedded within family networks.

Three limitations of my sample merit consideration. First, my sample comprises siblings whose ethnic origin is White British. I did not manage to recruit participants from any other ethnic background and my participants recalled little ethnic diversity growing up. Second, despite my aim to include half or step siblings all participants are full biological siblings. This may reflect less family diversity amongst this age-group as divorce was uncommon amongst the parents of my participants, some of whom also mentioned that they grew up in an era when illegitimacy was covered up. Finally, an issue that I considered and which my participants also raised, was whether individuals with problematic sibling relationships would be likely to come forward, something which was discussed at length during recruitment events. However, some participants discussed negative, indifferent or ambivalent feelings about their siblings or major conflicts in the past. So, my study does

include siblings who have experienced past problems, examples of sibling relationships that work best at a distance, and siblings who prefer to remain independent of each other. Thus, it is not the case that my sample only comprises sibling groups who have always got along well. Further consideration with regard to achieving theoretical sampling is discussed below.

5.7 Transcribing, coding and data analysis processes

While interviews were ongoing, and decisions about whether to continue interviewing were being taken, transcribing, coding and analysis processes were also running concurrently. So, although I write about them separately, they did all overlap. The process of *transcribing* audio recordings of what was said during the interviews, began on the day that each interview took place, and took between one and three days per transcript. I used the transcription conventions attached at Appendix Eleven. Examples of excerpts of transcripts are provided at Appendix Fourteen.

Transcribing involved listening to each interview in its entirety and then transcribing short sections at a time. Once each transcript was complete I checked repeatedly for mistakes. Although I carefully recorded pauses, fillers and intonations, reading the transcript compared to listening to the audio recording, made me realise that subtle layers of meaning were lost in translation. Although the use of verbatim (word by word) transcription in qualitative research has been challenged (see Loubere, 2017) because it omits non-verbal communication, is difficult and arduous technically, and varies in terms of accuracy, transcribing can aid the grounded theory process. I found transcribing the interviews myself rather than sending recordings off to a third-party transcriber beneficial. It ensured: that I listened to each interview several times, in a timely manner; that I inevitably read and re-read each transcript during the checking process; and it reinforced my memory of individual participants' accounts. Annotating transcripts reminded me about things that I might later have forgotten e.g. interruptions, or references to items such as photographs. Had I not transcribed and annotated interviews myself this type of contextual information might have

been lost. Furthermore, listening and re-listening to the interviews conferred an unexpected benefit: I could hear participants' voices in my head when subsequently reading coded segments of transcripts out of context. Thus, I could recall the way that things were said as well as what was said.

As Lewins (2001: 310) states "*discovery achieved by reading and re-reading is likely to be the most thorough method of exploring qualitative data.*" Paying close attention to the audio during transcription enabled me to listen for themes, and comments that I might want to develop, or come back to. Having, for instance noted which key events emerged from interviews aided my biographical analysis later, as discussed below. The transcription, and analysis process was also aided by ensuring that the recordings were of high quality and that the interviews were not disturbed by background noise, as far as was possible. Although, as noted later, having complete interview transcripts makes it tempting to code every utterance and explore every theme, compared to the alternative - note taking alone - recording and transcribing was the best option for me as a lone researcher. Using full interview transcripts benefitted my grounded theory approach as it allowed me to stay close to the participants' own words and revisit each interview, something which I needed to do whilst employing the constant comparative method as discussed below. This was extremely important, not just to my analysis, but because identifying what themes emerged from each interview was important in achieving saturation. Furthermore, as constant comparison is an analysis technique central to grounded theory (see page 119), going back and forth between the data from different interviews to compare and contrast is helped by having fully transcribed interviews, because it would not be possible to recall exactly what was stated by the former participants, had I relied on notes alone.

In addition to each audio recording and interview transcript *fieldnotes* were recorded as I went along, before and after each interview. I also noted down coding ideas, tentative theories, or comparisons between and within families (see Appendix Ten). At the end of their interview, some participants offered insight into sibling relationships in general which I

also recorded in fieldnotes. Fieldnotes were also used to provide context and aid analysis: *“Adding field notes about the setting, the conduct of the interview, the interviewee and so on, will help to bring back the context of the interview later in analysis”* (Fielding and Thomas, 2001: 137).

In terms of analysis it was important not to lose sight of the biographical element of the narratives which risked becoming fragmented during the coding process. In taking a biographical approach to analysis I conducted several activities concurrently. I initially focused on the entire narrative, having read and re-read it several times during the transcribing process, prior to coding it in MS Word and later in NVivo10, as discussed on page 118. Although participants' narratives were not always constructed chronologically, it was possible to develop a chronological time line. For instance, it was possible to examine each narrative in the context of key life-course events, the influence of other family relationships such as parents, the wider social context, and each participant's individual sense of agency. By coding interview segments to specific phases of the life-course (e.g. childhood, adolescence, early adulthood) or key transitions (e.g. school years, career building years, early parenthood years, retirement years) it was possible to examine each participant's past history, their current relationships, their future hopes and aspirations, and how and why particular attitudes and emotions had arisen. It was also valuable to group and interpret narrative sections that related to common experiences such the impact of the Second World War on family life. However, this was not straightforward because each sibling within a given sibling group may recall events differently.

A particular challenge concerned how to present my findings in a temporal way, in order to reflect and understand changes in sibling relationships over time. Bron and Thurnborg (2015) recommend conducting what they term diachronic analysis. This uses schemes or diagrams to visualise themes that arise from interview data. As discussed below, this was in fitting with my grounded theory approach. I used diagrams and colour coded the main themes that arose during each life-course phase: highlighting in bold those that were

present consistently in participants' narratives across the life-course in contrast with those which changed. For example, the theme of how separation affects sibling relationships arose in many narratives, and participants revealed that separation can be experienced in varying degrees at particular times in the life-course.

Bron and Thurnborg (2013) also suggest that presenting individual pen portraits and family portraits can aid analysis. Portraits in which key events, experiences and relationships are condensed, provide a descriptive analysis of the interviews and facilitate systematic restructuring of the data. Constructing my own portraits enhanced my understanding of participants' experiences as a whole and, as Bron and Thurnborg (2015; 11) conclude, made it possible to "unpack the sequences of life and discover the temporality of the data". For example, differences in how men and women experienced their sibling relationships during early adulthood, parenthood, and career building years emerged. This theme was best understood by using concepts present in the literature, because it can be understood in relation to life-course influences; cultural, social, and political influences; and cohort experiences. Thus, the influence of gender on how participants experienced their early adulthood sibling relationship could be understood by considering the effect of particular experiences, which were themselves also gendered e.g. men were required to do national service, whereas their sisters were expected to stay at home and help their mothers and/or sisters raise children.

According to Flick (2014a), *coding* is about applying labels to sections of data in order to categorise, encapsulate and describe that data. Using a grounded theory approach entails collecting data and coding in tandem. I used grounded theory to guide the fieldwork, noting when a new theme emerged. I discuss coding in detail because it is central to grounded theory. As described below, I applied a number of constructivist grounded theory approaches whilst developing my coding and analysis, which often ran concurrently: open coding, focused coding, diagrams, and memos. At certain points in the process I used NVivo10 to assist the organisation, coding, questioning, and analysis of the data.

An advantage of undertaking NVivo10 training and completing an assignment to assess its benefits prior to commencing my fieldwork meant that I was able to plan how I would use NVivo10 in my fieldwork, and for data storage and analysis. NVivo10, a data storage and organisational system, and a powerful analysis tool, enabled me to organise the complete data set, something that would have been arduous and difficult to do manually for all of my interview transcripts, fieldnotes, memos and background data.

The first step in employing NVivo10 to aid analysis was to set up a project on my computer into which interview transcripts, field notes, and an MS Excel file containing demographic data were uploaded. The second step was to use NVivo10 to organise my data. To this end, I created folders for each sibling group and as I explain later, I linked coded sections of transcripts to memos containing ideas, definitions and explanatory notes. Further data was added in the form of memos, annotations, diagrams, literature, and audio recordings. As discussed earlier, annotating interview transcripts captured contextual information relating to external factors, feelings, body language, actions (e.g. looking at photographs), and my initial thoughts about the significance of specific things that arose during the interviews (e.g. when a participant mentioned the same workplace as her sister). As recommended, I also kept a field journal the purpose of which was to keep track of my evolving ideas and concepts (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). I added to the journal with questions, thoughts, notes about actions, plans, and reasons/explanations for choices I had made regarding sampling and analysis.

A positive benefit of using NVivo10 is that it provides a thorough and rigorous coding and interpretation function, alongside enhanced data management. Yet, as Lewins (2001) points out, manipulating data relies on using appropriate search syntax and being mindful of occasions where speakers skirt around issues, or use euphemisms. (e.g. "*no longer with us*" to signify death). Due to the nature of the data, unlike quantitative data analysis software such as SPSS, NVivo10 cannot generate automated analysis processes, as it is designed to aid the analysis, not do the analysis. NVivo10 aided me during the course of my grounded

theory data analysis by enabling me to retrieve data items and coding segments, organise codes hierarchically and link memos to relevant codes or sections of interviews, in order to explore relationships between emerging codes, categories or concepts.

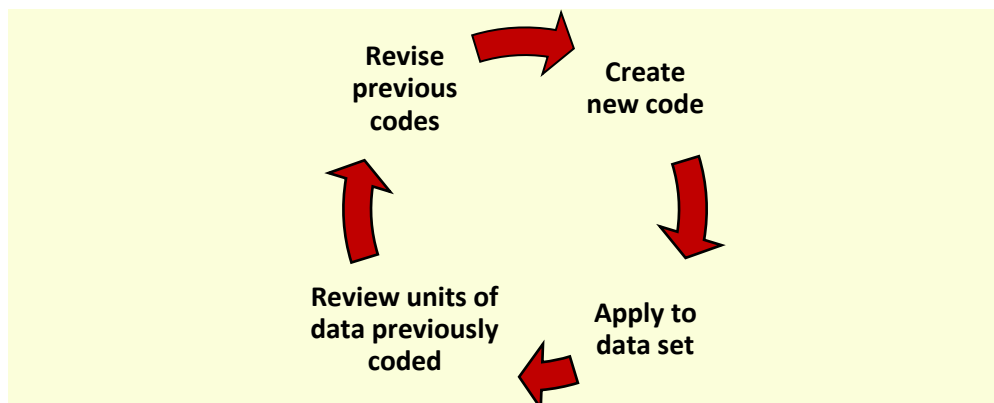
NVivo10 further supported my analysis by alleviating the burden created by repetitive, yet essential processes which I was able to do without altering my original data sources. It assisted me in processing data and identifying potential themes, concepts and tentative theories more efficiently than I would have been able to do manually. I felt that this also helped to keep the process flowing and my ideas about the data alive.

However, Nvivo10 is a powerful piece of software, and as this was the first time I had used it or conducted research of this nature, I did not use all of the functions available to me. Part of my learning journey necessitated completing some tasks manually (e.g. copying segments of coded transcripts that related to a specific theme and pasting them into a new document) in order to gain a thorough understanding of the best approach to take. I also explored a feature of NVivo10 that facilitates coding directly from interview recordings, thereby bypassing the need to transcribe complete interviews. However, I found coding from the audio time consuming, less fluid and felt it could potentially lead to sections of audio that sound similar being skipped over, whereas transcribing leads to greater scrutiny of the interview material, as discussed above. Overall, I viewed NVivo10 as a conduit or aid to analysis rather than a short cut to processing and conceptualising the data.

Thus, on completion of the transcribing process, I systematically coded each interview using an iterative process, detailed below, which I undertook initially using MS Word. However, once I had imported each transcript into NVivo10, I coded them again. Coding the transcripts for a second time within NVivo10 served as a coding check and helped me to validate and revise my original coding. As discussed above, during the coding and transcribing process, I became so familiar with the transcripts that reading sections out of context evoked memories of who they belonged to and of the participant's voice.

I questioned the meaning of emerging and continuing themes during interviews and subsequent transcribing process. I noted parallels between some families' narratives, as well as consistent and inconsistent accounts within sibling groups. In line with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), coding took place in two phases: open coding and focused coding. These two phases were not discrete, but overlapped in an iterative manner. I conducted *initial line by line coding (open coding)* on the 35 interview transcripts, ordered by sibling group, then interview order. The term open coding means that I approached the task of coding with an open mind, allowing codes to emerge from the data, rather than assigning my data to a pre-defined coding list (Charmaz, 2006). Coding was iterative, both within and across the sibling groups. When new codes emerged, I went back and determined whether the new code could be applied to previously coded interviews, drawing on an element of grounded theory termed the constant comparison method (Bryman, 2012). This ensures coding consistency and helps to identify when new (or better) codes are needed, or changes required (Taylor and Gibbs, 2010).

Figure 5.1: Coding process (after Taylor and Gibbs, 2010)



Several examples of this process of refining my coding are shown in table 5.4 below.

Table 5.4: Examples of iterative coding review process

Section of transcript	Initial coding	Refined code
It pained him, like it pained me	Concern	Empathy (emotional support)
He was a non-entity	Absent sibling	Emotional distance
We love each other now	Mutual love	Increased emotional closeness
We were able to help him a bit and I suppose he remembered those times	Support	Reciprocal support exchange

Through this process of revisiting and refining my codes, I identified for example that support appears to be reciprocal in nature, and that emotional closeness appears to be subject to change. Thus, I revised some of the labels that I'd applied to my codes early in the process to reflect the additional insight I gained subsequently. Although I initially applied line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006), moving to coding phrases allowed passages of narrative to be coded more meaningfully once I became familiar with the process. Sections of transcripts that were not fluent, or were repetitive, made line-by-line coding arduous. I coded the interviews initially within MS Word. I found it useful to have an easily accessible record of the coding for individual interviewees when comparing the narratives of siblings within a family. This also facilitated sharing my coding with my PhD supervisors because, during this stage, they also coded a selection of my transcripts in order to validate my coding processes.

As discussed above, to assist in managing such a vast amount of detailed data, I also coded using NVivo10. An advantage of coding using NVivo10 is that each open code is linked to the sentences, or phrases of interview transcripts with which it is associated. This not only leaves the original data intact, but negates the need to cut and paste sections of transcripts. The coding functions within Nvivo10 supported my analysis in several ways. First, I used Nvivo10 to apply standalone codes (referred to as nodes within NVivo10). Nodes provide a means of storing everything that relates to a coded concept or category (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Creating nodes within Nvivo10 is achieved by highlighting segments of text

and applying a meaningful label to that text. Once this is done it is easy to quickly locate any sections of any transcript that each code relates to. A strength of coding in Nvivo10 compared to MS word, or manual cut and paste methods, is the speed with which segments of text relating to each code are identified across all interviews. As coding in Nvivo10 leaves the entire transcript intact, I could also quickly locate the position of coded segments within whole transcripts which aided contextual understanding or helped when reviewing codes. Being able to access the original material that each section of coded text relates to, also helps to alleviate the likelihood of becoming too distanced from the data (Bazeley, 2007).

Second, I used Nvivo10 to re-organise some of my codes into tree nodes which enabled me to structure codes hierarchically once I had identified instances where several free nodes could be grouped together under a parent code. For example, I initially created ten codes based on participants' accounts of things that they recalled doing with their siblings at different points in the life-course. Initially these were stand-alone codes that represented various activities such as playing with siblings, going to school together, raising children together, or caring for an aged parent together. These stand-alone codes later became part of a major theme about 'sharing', and were further explored in relation to the influence of shared and non-shared experiences on sibling relationships in later life. Thus, using the tree node function facilitated me in identifying potential relationships between stand-alone codes.

As well as creating nodes with NVivo10 (i.e. stand-alone codes), I also thought about the relationship between nodes and began to develop a relational, and sometimes hierarchical, coding structure. Thus, revising coding was not just about producing better conceptual labels and descriptions, it was also about moving from detailed codes to codes that represented broader themes and concepts, and relationships between them. So, for example, different types of support became coded hierarchically under the umbrella code of "support and helping behaviours" (see Appendix Thirteen) and were related to reciprocal support exchange, life events, transitions, and emotional closeness. As shown in Appendix

Thirteen, I identified that different types of supportive behaviour were described by participants and coded them accordingly. Furthermore, a range of life events and transitions elicited support from siblings; thus, life events and support were interrelated. It was also through the use of diagramming that I first began to distinguish between supporting behaviours in later life and rediscovering a sibling as an important relationship for sociability and companionship. Diagrams were used to help me work out hierarchical relationships, links to other codes, and to identify change processes (see Appendix Thirteen).

As well as utilising NVivo10 to facilitate open coding (applying a code to highlighted text), to develop coding hierarchies and axial coding (exploring relationships between categories/subcategories of open codes, and the data), it also aided me with selective coding (using codes to select quotable material that illustrates relevant themes). In summary, using the coding features in NVivo10 facilitated quick searches to be conducted, gave me a feel for the data and identified areas for further investigation. (e.g. were there difference in closeness between men and women, and what factors influenced how respondents felt about their siblings?).

Importing and organising the data within Nvivo10 also assisted me in identifying broader themes, selecting topics for detailed analysis, and interrogating the data according to characteristics such as gender or family size. I used NVivo 10 to query the data, challenge my open coding and assist me with focussed coding. I was able to manage over 40 hours of transcripts using NVivo10. A useful starting point in exploring my data was NVivo's ability to count the frequency of every word (in a fraction of a second). The "*In vivo*" code feature enabled use of the respondents' own words, which was useful initially, particularly when developing a coding category proved difficult. NVivo10 also has more advanced querying and reporting features. Because NVivo10 has the facility to import external data, I was able to use quantitative and demographic data to aid the interrogation process. Importing participants' background data from Excel into Nvivo10 helped me to explore the relationship between variables such as age group or sex, and codes such as closeness and support.

For example, I compared what females aged over 70 said about siblings' roles in combating loneliness, compared to males over 70. Similarly, I was able to compare issues raised by female participants about their childhood relationships with their sisters, compared to their brothers, with those of male participants and their sisters, compared to their brothers. As my analysis developed it became apparent that participants' experiences of their sibling relationships were influenced by gendered expectations as a result of their family culture combined with societal expectations regarding gender norms at the time.

I also explored data using Quick searches for specific text in order to identify interviews of relevance to the concept of interest, for example: which interviews involved any discussion about emotional closeness. Interrogating data would have been an arduous task to conduct manually given the large volume of data generated by my research. Furthermore, because NVivo10 facilitates the addition of information relating to ideas, explanations and reflections it had the benefit of enabling me to quickly recall my thought processes. Although, as discussed, one of the dangers inherent in the software is that it is easy to over code the data, NVivo10 does have the benefit of facilitating the emergence of ideas naturally rather than attempting to fit data into previously established categories. Furthermore, as discussed, using Nvivo10 to assist grounded theory methodology worked well because categories and nodes could be revised and reordered as data collection proceeded and new data contributed additional insights. This enabled old data to be reshaped in fitting with the emerging framework.

Thus, a further advantage of managing the coding process within Nvivo10 is that it allows you to quickly move nodes around, merge nodes or group nodes together. It provides a quicker way of answering questions such as "*who described family as central?*" Features such as being able to quickly list the most frequently used words, or use the 'in vivo' function to develop nodes using participants' own terms, assisted me to identify emerging themes. A disadvantage of NVivo10 is that it allows you to create codes quickly, so I initially generated a vast array of codes and was tempted to code everything, even less relevant

sections of transcripts. This problem is a recognised concern (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). However, continually reviewing my codes to determine their pertinence, or whether they formed part of a coding hierarchy helped to overcome this problem, as noted above.

As indicated, part of my ongoing process of generating codes, considering concepts, and theory building, was to move to a *focused* stage of coding, and think more deeply about my open codes. I used a number of strategies to explore and compare the relationship between codes, aided by the use of diagrams and memos (see Appendices Twelve and Thirteen). The overarching aim of *focused coding*, as described by Glaser (2005), is to assist the researcher to identify the most significant core coding category which relates to every other code and does so more than other potential core category codes (Glaser, 2005). However, taking a more constructivist approach to grounded theory, as discussed earlier, allows for more flexibility (Charmaz, 2006) and the possibility that there may be more than one focused code which can be explored further (Flick, 2014b). Being open to this possibility has the benefit of enabling the researcher to remain “*sensitive and open to modifying their focused codes and being surprised by the data.*” (Flick, 2014b: 158).

Once the core categories identified during focused coding were becoming saturated, I began to move to theoretical coding. This was facilitated by drawing on the memos I had written during the coding process, which contained reflections on concepts and categories as they developed. For example, support was a major and recurrent theme, which could be viewed from the perspective of both the provider and the recipient of support. During the analysis process, the concept that support was reciprocal emerged, and understanding was gained about the nature of support. Thus, during the constant comparative process coding was being refined and analysis was progressing from description to conceptualisation. This ultimately resulted in the emergence of core categories and elaboration of the relationships between them, as presented in my subsequent findings chapters.

As discussed in Chapter Four, a constructivist approach to grounded theory can lead to the development of several core categories derived from the data, rather than one grand theory.

For example, as will be discussed in my analysis chapters, emerging from the data was the concept of ‘family values’. First experienced during childhood. ‘family values’ make a long-term contribution to the quality of later life sibling relationships. They are also shaped by life-course events and ultimately by those factors that inhibit or promote the need and ability to meet regularly in person. Because of the diversity of participants’ life experiences, family context and sibling group structures, life-course theory contributed to my understanding about events, past contexts and experiences that shape participants’ sibling relationships over the life-course and contribute to its meaning currently. Taking a life-course approach was an extremely useful way of conceptualising participants’ experiences, and constructivist grounded theory method was a valuable approach for exploring and analysing my data.

As outlined earlier, because the data collection, transcription, coding and analysis phases overlapped, working towards focused coding happened to some extent whilst I was still engaging in open coding. Thus, as I conducted open coding in NVivo10, I considered whether each code could form part of a broader concept, or wider theme. I also checked for consistencies and queried my coding scheme by asking “*does this code really belong here?*” or “*is this an example of a change in emotion or function?*” I corrected any inconsistencies in coding. For instance, on occasions I had created synonyms for an established code because I had latterly been influenced by a participant’s own choice of words. To ensure consistency of coding for such cases, I re-examined relevant sections of narrative and either merged codes together, or created a hierarchy using parent and child codes. For example, some siblings were described as being virtually “*absent*” or “*disinterested*” by participants, whereas other participants used the terms “*indifference*” and “*detachment*”. This meant I had four ways of coding the same type of more distant sibling relationship (see my memo at Appendix Twelve). Ultimately, I coded this under the parent code of “*emotional distance*”, which eventually became part of my examination of *changes* in emotional closeness.

I also used NVivo10 to identify how often each code had been used, and which interviews each code applied to, or in some cases did not apply to. This enabled me to look for patterns within and across the families. It formed part of my checking and validation process by asking questions such as, “*this family did not appear to raise the theme of support, have I missed something, or has the need for support not arisen?*” Themes centred on emotion were often difficult to capture because some participants openly discussed feelings of love, affection, or jealousy, whereas other participants’ accounts needed greater reflection and consideration in order to interpret meaning. It was particularly difficult for instance to be sure that I had coded sections of narrative where changes in the relationship were discussed, because participants often denied that their sibling relationships had changed, but then proceeded to give me examples of changes. The theme of support was also complex because differences arose in recognition and admission about support received, support given and types of support. Furthermore, some participants had needed support from a sibling, whereas others had not.

In summary, coding at a detailed level initially generated 503 codes. As I became more confident and competent at coding, I refined and improved my coding, checking for inconsistencies, merging some codes together and creating a hierarchical structure for others. Once I had done this, I revised my coding into 112 codes. Once I had further defined these codes, broader themes were identified from the narratives e.g. supporting behaviours, reciprocity, roles and responsibilities, changes in emotional closeness, ambivalence, contact and geographical proximity, barriers to relationship maintenance behaviours, the effect of marriage, gender differences, companionship, the significance of transitions such as widowhood, and the importance of sibling relationships compared to other family relationships and friendships. Many of these themes are interrelated as will be discussed in the main findings chapters that follow Chapter Six.

The *mapping* tool within NVivo10 enabled me to visually represent the links between codes and also with memos. Although the modelling tools in Nvivo10 can be applied to many stages of the analysis process such as making comparisons between codes, demonstrating relationships between codes, representing findings visually and helping to highlight or emphasis significant findings, I found them most useful for exploring the data. For example, I used this function to map the connection between shared and non-shared experience and family context. This led to the finding that shared or non-shared experiences earlier in life, and the formation of sibling alliances, were influenced by the wider themes of family structure and culture, as well as other themes pertaining to disruption to family life. I found it useful to map out codes and themes diagrammatically (Appendix Thirteen) in order to visualise the complex relationships between them. Such visual representation as a means of developing analytical ideas is fundamental to grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006). Through the use of diagrams, I was able to explore the relationship between concepts such as reciprocity and emotional closeness, and roles and responsibilities. Although I used NVivo10 to map relationships between codes initially, the drawing tools within NVivo were limiting and time consuming. So, although using NVivo10 initially encouraged me to represent data visually, in practice I often found that drawing diagrams free hand aided my thought processes and preferred to do this, and I sometimes modified them using MS Word (see Appendix Thirteen).

During the data collection, transcribing, coding and analysis process, I found that keeping records of thoughts, ideas, queries and questions in the form of *memos* was an important aspect of the analytical process. Bryman (2004) describes memos as records kept by researchers that serve as reminders of the ideas they have about the data. It is recommended, as part of constructivist grounded theory, that memo writing begins early in the process to allow researchers to explore their codes, categories and the links between them, and also to develop and keep an ongoing record of ideas about the analysis that can

be drawn on as needed (Flick, 2014a). Although I initially wrote memos within MS Word as I coded interviews, I later imported some of them into NVivo10 and used the link tool so that a specific memo could be linked to particular interviews (see Appendix Twelve). I felt that one of the main benefits of memo writing was that it kept the process alive and, as described by Charmaz (2012: 9), memo writing felt like a means of “*interacting with your data and nascent analysis*”. In fact, I was guided by Charmaz’s (2006) approach to using memos in developing concepts from focused codes. She suggests using a memo to define each category/concept; explain how, where, when it arose; whether or how it developed; and how it relates to other categories.

As noted on page 119 during the data analysis phase I used the constant comparative method as a means of exploring and interpreting the data in order to compare each emergent finding with my previous findings. This iterative process began with my first interview. For example, when one segment of text was coded as “support” I checked the interview to see if other segments also fitted the label of support. I was then able to compare the fragments of data that related to support in order to discover more about this category, which I was then able to elaborate on as more data about support was gathered. This type of comparison of coding within the same interview helped to identify whether new information arose during the course of the interview, or whether information was repeated or contradictory. Furthermore, because participants were discussing their sibling relationships over the life-course, it was important to recognise the context in which each code was discussed. So, for example, support was highlighted as having been significant at different points in the life-course, from childhood to the current time, and support could be given, received, exchanged, appreciated, or even unrecognised. Thus, my initial coding helped me to think about each coding category in the context of the entire interview, in order to understand which events or actions participants felt were significant in shaping their current sibling relationships.

Once I had coded my first interview, I had a set of provisional codes and had begun to define or ask questions about each of them. As the interview process continued, I repeated the same process of coding each interview individually and further developed or refined codes and memos, lists of questions, and my explanatory notes, which began to take shape and ultimately became part of my writing up and theorising. Coding subsequent interviews also led to me revisiting previously coded interviews as patterns began to emerge from the data, or I felt that some of my initial coding needed revising in light of new information.

As the number of interviews that I had coded increased, I began to compare my interviews. This was quite a lengthy and complex process, as it involved comparing the accounts of participants from within sibling groups and across sibling groups, some of whom shared the same or similar experiences and others of whom did not. At the same time, who I chose to interview next began to be influenced by questions that had been raised during the comparison process. So, for instance, whereas the first two sibling groups were selected based on their differing compositions, subsequent sibling groups were selected for different reasons, e.g. because they came from a different social background, because they had experienced sibling loss, or because they grew up apart. My selections therefore became more closely aligned with my evolving interpretation of the data and tentative theoretical ideas which, as they were provisional, required further exploration. For example, it was becoming apparent that how support was perceived and exchanged might be linked to family culture as well as to whether individuals had experienced the type of life events that are likely to elicit sibling support e.g. widowhood. Thus, as more interviews were coded, themes and patterns began to emerge so that the data was no longer comprised of lists of codes and associated memos, but themes that I was able to explore by systematically comparing interviews and writing in a more focused way about these themes.

Through the process of constant comparison it became clear that some interviews were comparable with respect to certain criteria. For example, sisters from some sibling groups had the same experiences as sisters in other sibling groups with respect to sharing childcare

between them and therefore building up greater shared experience and displaying higher levels of interdependency. Conversely, other interviews did not fit this pattern. For instance, those sisters who moved away to pursue careers or education or who did not have children, and so this was also explored.

Comparison of interviews from within sibling groups also enabled me to ascertain which issues were central to each sibling relationship and to identify areas of agreement and of contention. This involved intensely comparing and exploring the core themes that were identified within sibling groups. Sometimes each sibling within the group confirmed what the others had said and this reinforced particular patterns. For example, many interviewees described family-oriented upbringings with strong maternal kin keepers who they all agreed had influenced how well they function as a sibling group. However, in other cases it was very difficult to explore some concepts within sibling groups due to omissions or contradictions, or just because, over time, perspectives have changed. For example, some participants cited examples of support exchange which were either denied or not recalled by their siblings. Thus, comparisons between interviews can reinforce codes, concepts or ideas or lead to further questioning of those ideas.

Thus, at this point I was beginning to develop a more conceptual understanding of each set of sibling relationships, the main issues that each sibling group identified as central to their relationship, and the influence of life events on them. This was reflected also in the memos that I wrote about things that seemed to be specific to some sibling groups, but shared with others. For example, some siblings spent time away from home, together, whereas family life was central for others, and this influenced how their childhood sibling relationship developed. So, for each category that arose it was possible to compare and contrast sibling groups as well as individual participants' experiences and determine what were typical differences, and the reasons for them, and what these differences were due to. I questioned whether they were due to upbringing, particular experiences, or sibling group structure.

When particular phenomena were shared it was possible to compare participants' accounts of their effects. For example, those who were widowed gave fairly similar accounts of the support given to them by their siblings. The few who did not, gave an alternative perspective which I also explored. This helped to reveal that for some, barriers to face-to-face contact are inhibiting support exchange in later life. Thus, during my analysis, there were many stages of comparison going on simultaneously and iteratively, which I was tracking, summarising and writing about. The process of analysing my data, prior to writing my thesis, took about twelve months, due the wealth of data and the complexity of analysing sibling relationships from multiple perspectives.

A final aspect of the process of data analysis was to consider how and when 'saturation' was employed, both in relation to my sample and thus my decisions about when to stop recruiting (see page 132, below), and in respect of whether the categories themselves were well established, and the relationships between them defined and validated. My decision about when to exit the field was made when it was clear that my final sibling group had not introduced any new themes for me to analyse.

However, in terms of ensuring that saturation of my coding categories was achieved, my aim to interview as many siblings from within each sibling group as were willing and able to participate enabled me to gather data relating to each major category from a range of viewpoints. I was also able to saturate coding categories with data from interviews both across and within sibling groups with respect to their experiences of their relationships at different points in the life-course. From the patterns that were emerging in the data it became evident that participants were highlighting the same life-course stages and events as having an important bearing on their sibling relationship. The final step that I took to ensure that saturation of my coding categories was achieved was to compare the accounts of participants who had markedly different experiences and therefore produced very different biographical accounts to other participants. For example, as childhood experiences were highlighted as extremely significant by the majority of participants, it was important to

compare accounts of participants who were raised separately to their siblings with those who were not. Similarly, it was important to compare the experiences of sisters who moved away to pursue careers, or did not have children, with those of sisters who remained proximate to their family of origin, as well as to the experience of brothers. I felt that the additional insights gained from selecting a diverse sample of participants helped to identify some of the social and cultural influences on my participants' sibling relationships during their middle adulthood years. Thus, as my analysis evolved, selection became less purposive and more theoretical, and this applied to participants' current situation as much as their earlier life experience. However, inevitably as data analysis progressed, I noted that fewer and fewer new insights were being gained. For example, although the accounts of the last siblings that I interviewed are unique, personal to them, and extremely interesting and well-articulated, their narratives do not identify new circumstances or life-course events of significance.

Because I used grounded theory methodology, and *theoretical sampling*, it is important to consider whether the point at which I left the field was potentially limiting. As the processes of data collection, coding and data analysis ran concurrently, the aim of theoretical sampling originally was that the data collected thus far should determine what data the researcher collects next (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In reality, I was able to adopt this approach to a certain extent so, for instance, it did influence the *order* in which I chose to interview particular sibling groups. During the process of interviewing and transcribing I kept a spreadsheet detailing the main themes emerging from each interview in order to help me consider whether saturation point was reached.

However, this decision was not straightforward. For instance, the two larger families in the study identified similar themes when talking about early influences on their sibling relationships and their relationship maintenance routines. Had I interviewed those two families, followed by a third large family, I might have found that no new themes emerged, or there was no further elaboration of existing themes. Towards the end of interviewing the large families I sensed that similar themes were emerging. For instance, the eldest sibling from one family raised similar issues to the eldest from another. I also noted that for those sibling groups which comprised more than three siblings, once I started to interview the fourth sibling in the group, knowledge gained from their siblings' interviews came into play and less new material was gained. However, when interviewing a different type of family, new themes emerged again. So, for example, participants who had been separated from their siblings during childhood and remained dispersed as adults, raised different themes. By the end of the interview process I had interviewed every eligible volunteer and, at the point that I left the field, no new volunteers had come forward. My supervisors and I met and discussed the limitations of my sample, namely that cultural issues may be a limitation of my findings as my grounded theory is necessarily constructed on the basis of the data I collected.

5.8 Conclusion

During this chapter I have outlined my approach to recruitment, transcribing, coding and analysis. I have explained the limitations that my approach poses and outlined some of the tools and techniques that I used to assist with interpretation and development of analytical approaches. Drawing on my analyses, my participant information data and my knowledge of, and reflections on, each of the interviews, Chapters Six to Nine present the key findings of my study. Chapter Six introduces the eleven sibling groups as a way of contextualising subsequent findings and providing the reader with a sense of each of the families. Chapter Seven then focusses on the importance and nature of participants' sibling relationships now

in later life. Conceptually, I show how these relationships continue to be negotiated and renegotiated, consider how important these relationships are, and what it is that mediates and impacts on them. In Chapter Eight, I then concentrate more particularly on siblings as providers of support and companionship in later life and discuss the nature of that support. I draw attention to the concept that reciprocity contributes to participants' willingness to exchange support with their siblings, and also that participants experience emotional gain from helping their siblings. Finally, in Chapter Nine, I consider the influence of past experiences in order to help illuminate and account for the diverse sibling relationships which exist amongst my sample. In particular I discuss how sibling group structure, family context and culture, and life-course events have, together, shaped the nature and meaning of participants' current sibling relationships.

Chapter Six: An introduction to the families

6.0 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the sibling groups who participated in my study in order to contextualise and facilitate understanding of the data presented within the findings chapters. I first provide a summary of the background data pertaining to the whole sample, describe each sibling group, and then provide a summary of each family. Pen portraits of each individual participant are also provided at Appendix Fifteen.

6.1 Characteristics of the sample

Prior to the interview, each participant provided background information for comparative purposes (see Data Collection Proforma, Appendix Seven). The original sample comprised twelve sibling groups. However, one sister-sister pair, who were recruited via a gatekeeper, did not meet the study selection criteria. Therefore, the final sample comprises eleven sibling groups: a total of 35 participants. All *participating families* comprise **full biological** siblings. One sibling group experienced parents divorcing, three sibling groups lost one parent prematurely, and the rest experienced sustained parental marriages. No participants have living parents. Participants' **original** sibling groups ranged from two to ten siblings, with **current** sibling groups consisting of two to eight siblings. Participants from five families have experienced the loss of one or more siblings, and two participants have lost a twin sibling. Sibling losses occurred in childhood or middle age, and therefore no participants have lost a sibling in old age.

Table 6.1 shows the *age-sex distribution* of the sample in 10-year age bands. Participants range in age from 57 to 86 years old, with the majority (80%) being over 70 as might be expected, given my sampling criteria (see Appendix Two). As younger siblings of the initial

sibling from each group to volunteer were included in the study, seven participants are aged between 60 and 69, and one is under 60. There are more sisters in the sample than brothers, except in the 70-79 year age band. This is because there were more sisters than brothers in the larger families, and more brothers have died than sisters. Also, there are more non-participating brothers than sisters because, of the potential pool of siblings (22 sisters and 19 brothers), 20 sisters took part compared to 15 brothers. In terms of the gender balance of the participating sibling groups, there are eight mixed-sex sibling groups, one sister-only pair and two brother-only pairs.

Table 6.1: Age-sex distribution of the participants

Age group	Females	Males	All	Proportion of Females
50-59	1	-	1	100.0%
60-69	4	2	6	66.7%
70-79	10	11	21	47.6%
80-89	5	2	7	71.4%
Total	20	15	35	57.1%

Marital status was collected because, as discussed in Chapters Two (page 18) and Three (page 43), previous studies indicate that widowed or divorced individuals may form closer sibling relationships in later life. Overall, 19 (57%) of the 35 participants are married, 6 are divorced and 10 are widowed, as shown in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Marital Status of participants by sex

Marital Status	Females	Males	All
Divorced	5	1	6
Married	7	12	19
Widowed	8	2	10
Grand Total	20	15	35

The distribution of married participants changes with age. For example, there are no widowed participants in the youngest age group, 50 to 69, and only one is divorced. In the age group 70 to 79, twelve (57%) of the twenty-one participants are married, three are

divorced (14%) and six are widowed (29%). In the oldest age group, 80 and over, only one participant is married. This shows that those aged eighty and over are highly likely to have lost their spouse. Moreover, that 60% of participants aged 75 or over are widowed or divorced, supports the findings of other studies that show older adults are more likely to have living siblings than a living spouse (Cicirelli, 1989). Overall, a greater proportion of brothers are married and a greater proportion of sisters are widowed. As might be expected, all married participants live with their spouse. Two married participants also have an adult child living with them. Of the six divorced participants, the female participants live alone and the male divorcee has an adult daughter living with him. Of the ten widowed/widower participants, nine live alone (eight females and one male), whilst one has an adult son living with her. Overall, more female participants are living alone compared to male participants.

Because, as discussed in Chapter Three (page 58), *availability of adult children* is considered to influence feelings of emotional closeness between siblings, whether participants have children nearby has been explored. During pilot interviews, it became apparent that grandchildren and great grandchildren are also important relationships to some participants, and others highlighted that links to nephews, nieces, and great-nephews and great-nieces are important. Thus, as well as their own parental status, some participants feel that their siblings' parental status is important too. Only four participants are not biological parents, two of whom are brothers from the same family. Another male participant adopted children and a female participant became a step-parent in her forties to an adult step-daughter. A fifth participant has been estranged from her children for most of their lives, and is unsure if she has grandchildren. 30 of the 35 participants currently have grandparent relationships. 27 participants have biological grandchildren and three have non-biological grandchildren. One participant in her fifties may have grandchildren in the future as her adult children are relatively young. As mentioned, one participant is unsure if she has grandchildren. Of the remaining three participants, two have no grandchildren as

they are not parents, and one who does have children has no grandchildren because his children do not want children. Ten participants are great grandparents, and several mentioned that great grandchildren are 'on their way'.

I asked participants whether they regularly *care* for anyone, in order to explore whether caring duties inhibited their sibling relationships, or conversely elicit either emotional or practical support. Eight participants consider themselves to be carers and several perform more than one caring role. Four participants help to care for grandchildren after school, five participants care for an ill spouse, and one cares for their mother-in-law. Three participants' caring roles are more formal. One is providing 24/7 end of life support for a spouse, and two are supporting spouses who have debilitating health problems which affect daily living. Other participants have experienced being a carer for a terminally ill spouse or parent in the past. I consider the impact of caring duties on participants' ability to interact with their siblings in Chapter Seven (page 175) and in Chapter Eight (pages 181-183).

Proximity to siblings and other family members, particularly adult children, was collected in order to explore what effect geographical distance between siblings and the availability of other family members has on sibling relationships. 21 participants (60%) revealed that they live with an important family member (19 with their spouse, two with an adult child). Twelve of these also have other important family members within a two-mile radius which, in eleven cases, is adult children and, in one case, a mother-in-law. The remaining nine who live with someone have no other family living within two miles of them and their spouse. 14 participants (40%) live alone. Seven of these have family within close proximity, as five have adult children nearby, and two have each other nearby. Seven of the participants who live alone (20% of the study group) have no family within a two-mile radius. Overall, eleven participants have no family members (other than a spouse, if married) within five miles, four

of whom live alone. In fact, six of these eleven have no important family members within a 25-mile radius, two of whom live alone. Moreover, three of this sub-group of eleven have no important family members within a 250-mile radius, two of whom live alone. As shown in Table 6.3 *current proximity* to siblings varies widely.

Table 6.3: Current Proximity to Siblings

Sibling Group	Geographical proximity		
The Bennetts	Mark and Abigail live about ¼ of a mile from each other on the same estate, not far from where they spent their childhood.		
The Blacks	Jonathon and Edward live in the former parental home.	Evie, Frank and Alison live in the same city, a few miles away from Jonathon and Edward.	Denise lives 20 miles South of the parental home, Belinda lives 100 miles South and Carl 150 miles North.
The Browns	Carol, Eric, and Olive live about 2 miles apart in the area where they grew up.	Diana, Felicity, Sydney, Janet and Dennis live within a few miles of Carol and each other.	Liz lives more than 250 miles away from the others.
The Coals	Hilary and Liam have lived about 250 miles apart since leaving home.		
The Greens	Anthea lives near to where they grew up. Carolyn lives 250 miles away.		
The Greys	Robert and Adrian live 60 miles apart, having both moved away.		
The Peacocks	Len lives in the village where they grew up.	Harriet and Edith emigrated to the other side of the Atlantic and live near each other.	
The Reeds	Rebecca and David live 6 miles apart, 10 miles from where they grew up.	Ralph has emigrated to a European country about a 2-hour flight from the UK.	
The Scarletts	Karen and Henry live in the UK about 100 miles apart, far from where they grew up.	Jack emigrated to the other side of the Atlantic.	Sharon emigrated to the other side of the Atlantic (a different country to Jack).
The Silvers	Gareth and Richard grew up separately and live 400 miles apart.		
The Whites	Tom lives in a city where they spent some of their childhood.	Anita lives about 70 miles South of Tom.	Elizabeth lives 200 miles South of Tom and Doris 250 miles North of Tom.

The most proximate participants are the Bennett siblings who live on the same housing estate, although two non-participating Black siblings have always lived together. The Scarlett, Peacock and Reed siblings are dispersed and have at least one sibling who has emigrated, although two of the Reed siblings now live within close proximity. Eight of the nine Brown siblings live within a few miles of each other, as do five of the eight Black siblings. Eleven participants live within close proximity to their participating siblings, but the majority (24) live further away, five of whom have emigrated.

6.2 Sibling group portraits

In this section, each sibling group is presented diagrammatically (Figures 6.1 to 6.12), and each diagram is followed by a written summary. In addition to the family portraits provided here, individual pen portraits can be found in Appendix Fifteen.

Figure 6.1: Key to sibling group diagrams and headings.

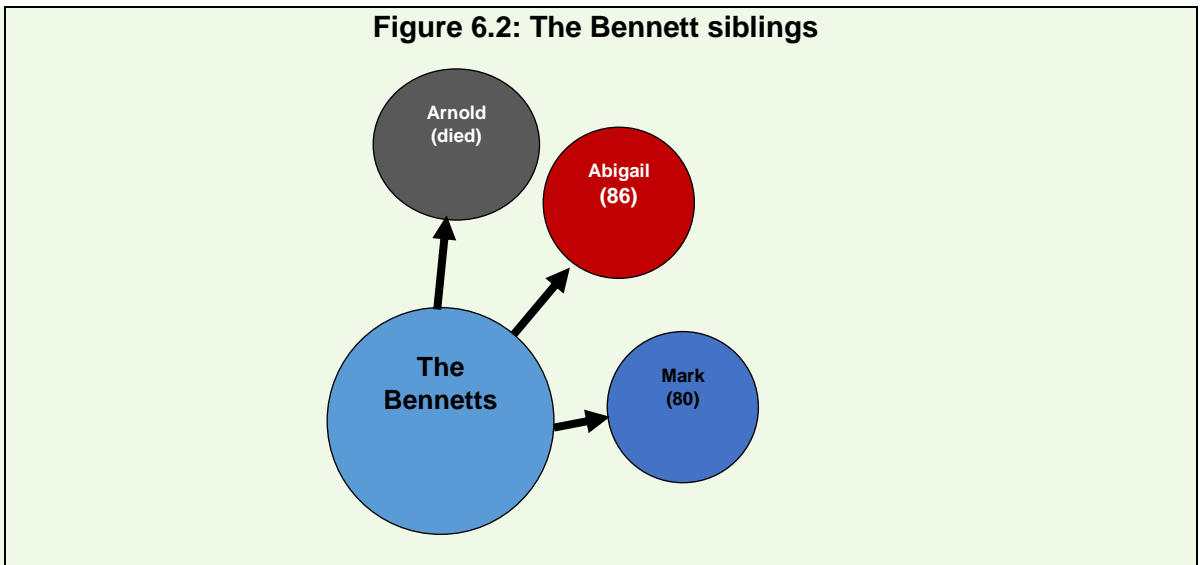
Each member of the sibling group is presented consecutively, in age order, from the top of diagram, so that the oldest sibling in the family is placed at the 12 o'clock position. Siblings who have died are represented by a **dark grey** circle and non-participants by a **gold** circle. The primary contact for the study is represented by a **red** circle, and their participating siblings by **blue** circles. Twins are presented by over lapping their circles. E.g. In Figure 6.1 **Abigail Bennett** is the primary contact, **Mark Bennett** is her participating sibling and their brother, **Arnold** has died.

The age of each sibling at the time of interview is presented in brackets. E.g. In Figure 6.1 Abigail Bennet is 86 years old and her brother Mark is 80 years old.

The sibling group heading indicates the siblings' interview **order**. E.g. Abigail Bennett was interviewed before Mark Bennet; and Eric Brown was interviewed first and Liz Brown last.

The Bennett siblings: Abigail and Mark

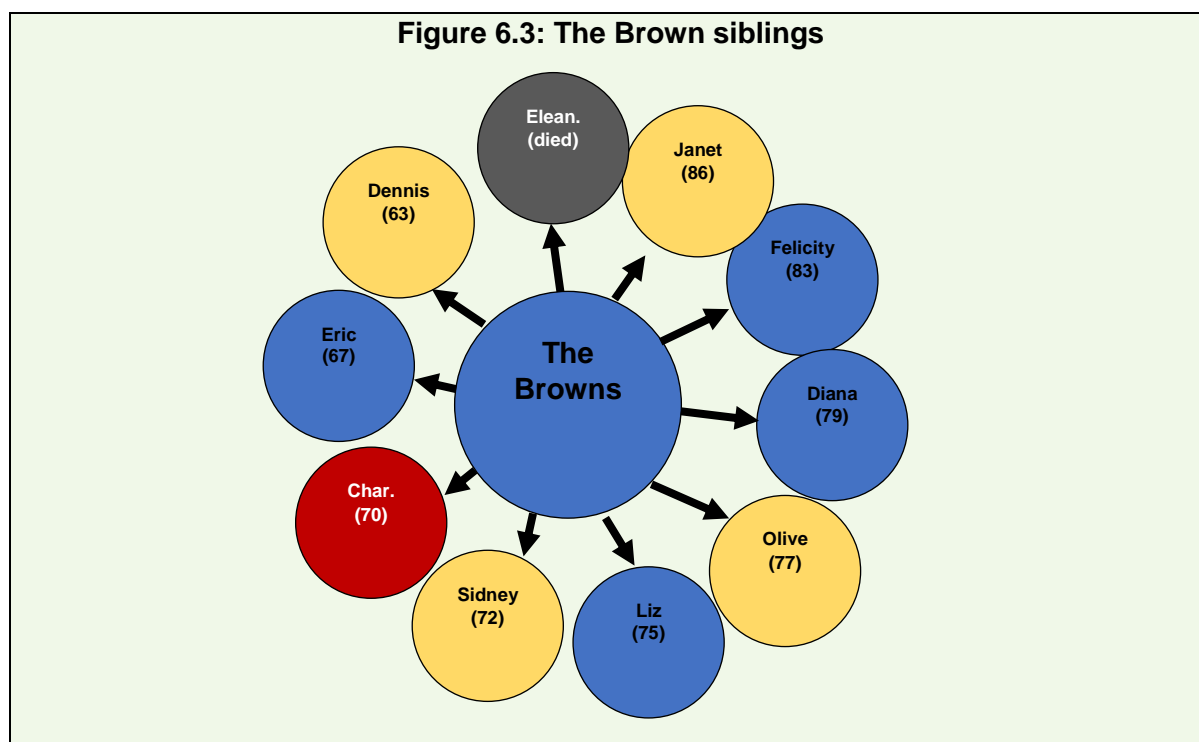
Abigail and Mark are two surviving siblings from a group of three siblings.



Abigail enquired about the study following my article in a community magazine. Abigail's memories of Mark's younger years are vivid, particularly the effect of childhood illness on his development. A difficult relationship with their oldest sibling drew them closer. Both recall that their close, caring childhood relationship lessened when Abigail formed a close friendship and had less time for Mark. Marriage created distance as Abigail's husband restricted her family contact. Mark moved away once married, but having children in a "*stepwise manner*" brought Abigail and Mark closer. Abigail's relationship with Mark's first wife was close. When contact was less, Abigail and Mark's mutual interest never waned. Later, Mark re-married and moved closer to their widower father, and to Abigail. They saw each other often when visiting their father. When Abigail's husband died Mark was supportive, but was caring for his wife at this time. Since Mark's wife died, he visits Abigail every day. He describes a role change due to Abigail's increasing fragility. Abigail views Mark as supportive, practically and emotionally. The Bennetts share a life-long interest in each other's achievements, and in music and theatre. They show mutual admiration and value talking deeply about anything. Mark corroborates Abigail's view that their relationship is close, but feels it was less important during his career and family raising years.

The Brown Siblings: Eric, Charlotte, Diana, Felicity and Liz

The Brown siblings are five participating siblings from a group of nine, originally ten, siblings.

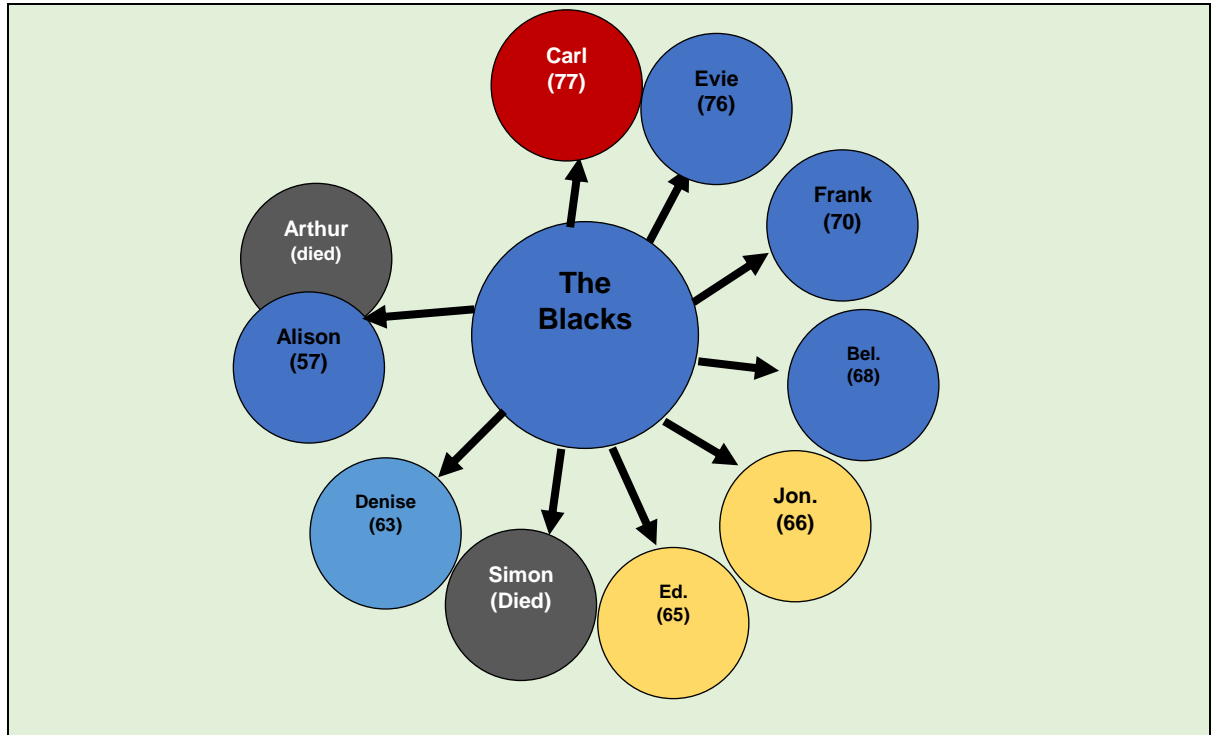


Charlotte made contact following my local radio appeal. The Brown siblings share pride in their family-oriented upbringing and strong maternal kin-keeper who raised them to “*think of family as the nucleus*”. Extended family was proximate and they were embedded within their local community. They describe both peer-like and caretaker-type sibling relationships, and shared and non-shared experiences. Sharing and feeling secure are childhood themes. Marriage and leaving home created new routines but did not alter their emotional closeness. Meeting weekly at the parental home continued after their parents died for those who were proximate. They enjoy being together, although life events are mediators. Five siblings are more connected and keep the others involved. Loss of a spouse intensified the widowed sisters’ relationships with each other and their supportive younger brother. They value sociability and togetherness. The younger siblings’ roles are changing as their elder sisters age. They rarely differentiate between siblings, convey togetherness, and are a solid family unit.

The Black Siblings: Alison, Denise, Belinda, Evie, Frank, Carl

The Black siblings are six siblings from a group of eight siblings, that was ten originally.

Figure 6.4: The Black siblings

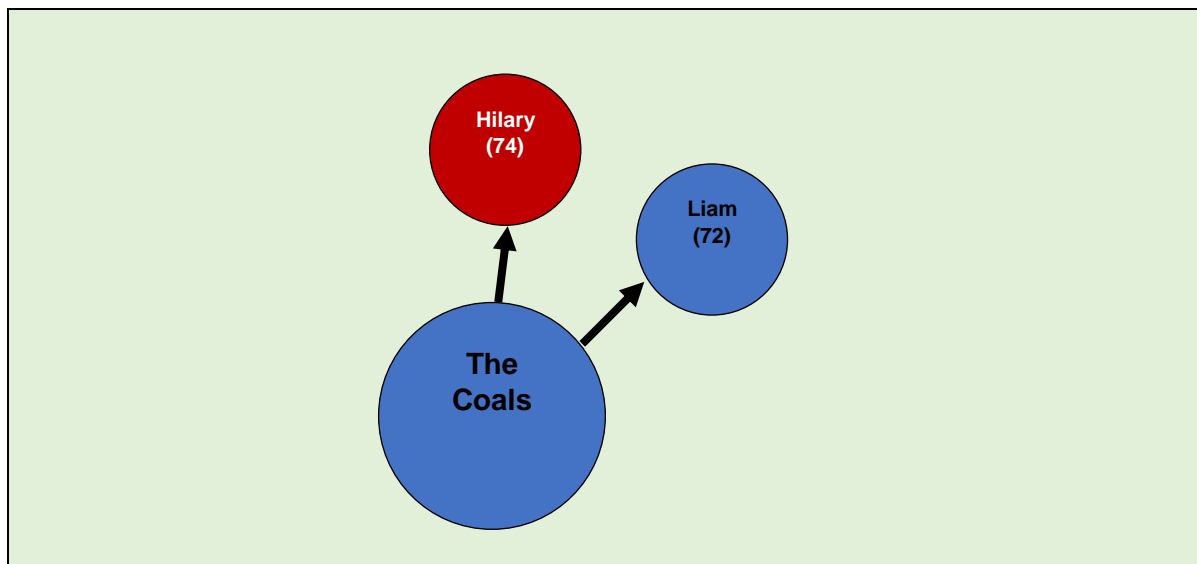


Carl heard about the study via my social network. The Black siblings had a warm, loving upbringing. They shared thoughts, emotions, and possessions. They are proud of their “*self-contained*” family. Feelings of comfort, safety and security have endured. Their strong maternal kin-keeper emphasised the importance of getting on with each other. Following marriage, a regular routine of visiting was established and maintained. The former parental home is a gathering point. Two brothers have always lived there. All but two siblings live proximate now. They rarely differentiate between siblings and love each other equally. Support is a strong theme. Their siblings are the first people they would turn to in a crisis. Losing two brothers has given them a sense of vulnerability. They now have time to come together since other family commitments have reduced. The whole sibling group goes on holiday with their spouses. They have fun in each other’s company, and come across as being friends as well as siblings. Sociability is a feature of their current sibling relationships.

The Coal siblings: Hilary and Liam

The Coal siblings are an original sister-brother pair.

Figure 6.5: The Coal Siblings

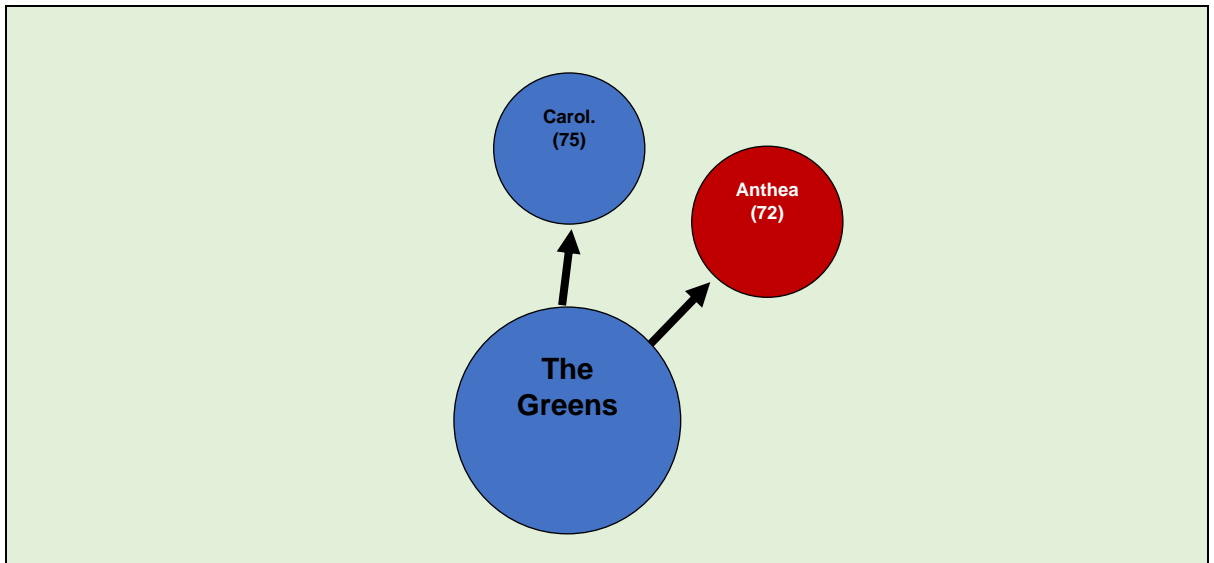


Hilary heard about the study from another participant. The Coal siblings moved around during their first ten years together and then went to separate boarding schools. Liam has less recollection of their time prior to Boarding School. They both recall getting on well during their summer holidays spent together. Hilary recalls minor “*normal*” brother-sister disagreements, and both recall a harmonious relationship. During their time apart, Liam recalls no contact whereas Hilary recalls exchanging letters. Hilary recalls more contact when at University than Liam who did an apprenticeship nearby. Once married with families they became geographically distant. Liam recalls both families spending Easter with their mother. Following her death, their relationship drifted. They rarely meet. Liam visits Hilary and her family on big family occasions. Hilary and her husband visit Liam on their way to other places and both mention that Liam’s wife is absent during those visits. Hilary recalls Liam being supportive when their father died and when their mother needed support. Liam feels that Hilary has more support from her husband, and does not need to be dependent on Liam. They agree that Liam is not family-oriented. Liam places importance on friendships, independence and self-reliance. Hilary has a close relationship with twin female cousins who are an important part of her family network.

The Green Siblings: Anthea and Carolyn

The Green siblings are an original sister-sister pair.

Figure 6.6: The Green Siblings

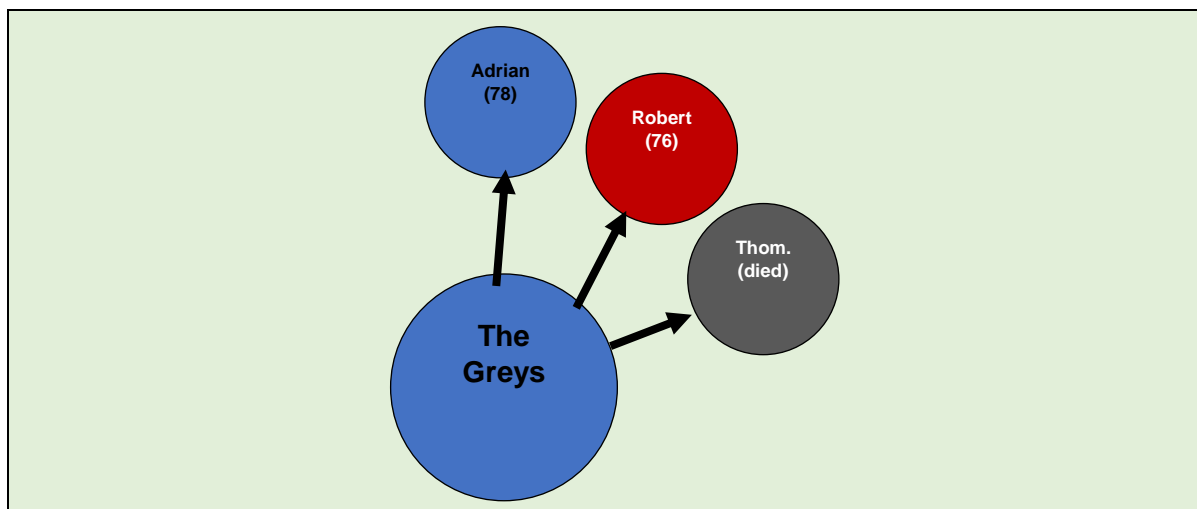


Anthea made contact following my local Radio appeal. The Green sisters come from a strong family unit, with loving parents. They were not close as children as Anthea's childhood illness overshadowed their earlier relationship. Following a long convalescent period Anthea returned a semi-invalid, a stark contrast to her healthy, sporty sister. They developed an intimate relationship as teenagers when they felt *"ready to blend"*. On leaving school they worked and socialised together. Once married with children they saw each other every day. Anthea recalled Carolyn moving away as *"a wrench"* and one of the worst days of her life. Carolyn, who was starting a new life, believed that their relationship would endure at a distance, and it has. They describe ups and downs in their relationship and times when they have hurt each other deeply, despite being emotionally close. Their relationship is based on talk, confiding, shared Christian values and moral code, and having *"the same thoughts and opinions."* Carolyn describes her role as protecting Anthea, who is a widow. Anthea believes that an older sister *"replaces a mother's trust."* Despite geographical distance the sisters are close and intimate. They keep in touch via a fixed weekly phone call and text messages. They attribute their closeness to parental influence and their opposing personalities of *"listener and talker."*

The Grey siblings: Robert and Adrian

The Grey siblings are two surviving brothers from an original group of three.

Figure 6.7: The Grey Siblings

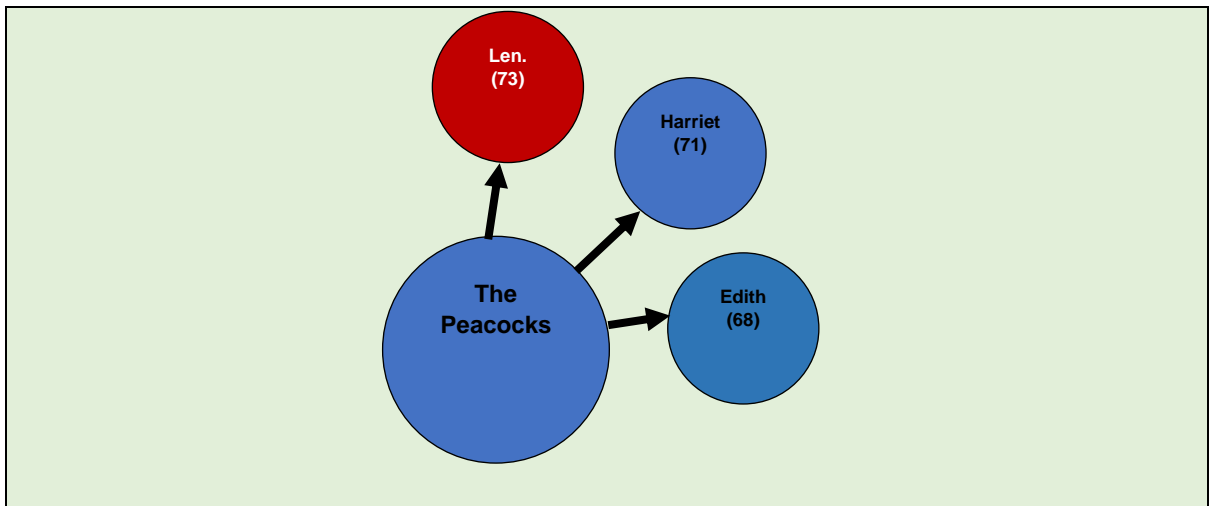


Robert responded to my post on an alumni forum. The Grey brothers present a strong image of brotherhood and solidarity whilst recounting their rural upbringing spent pursuing common interests together. Mutual admiration is based on qualities such as physical strength, courage, encouragement, and empathy. They recall pride in how they came across to other people growing up because they were a team as well as brothers. They identified the same key events and transitions that have shaped their relationship. The death of their mother cemented their relationship. Leaving home represented a “*tearing of the relationship*” and the beginning of them developing different interests. Once married, being part of two couples who got on well drew them closer again. The tragic loss of Adrian’s first wife elicited support and empathy from Robert. This renewed their earlier closeness and they engaged in outdoor pursuits together. Adrian describes how positive Robert was about him re-marrying. There are sensitivities within their relationship. They agree that their differing religious beliefs are potentially divisive. Although they haven’t lived geographically proximate since leaving home, they have a strong emotional connection. Current contact between them is less. Robert is busy with grandchildren and feels Adrian needs him less. They identify sibling relationships as important and their relationship is strong.

The Peacock Siblings: Len, Harriet and Edith

The Peacock Siblings are a group of three siblings, one brother and two sisters.

Figure 6.8: The Peacock siblings

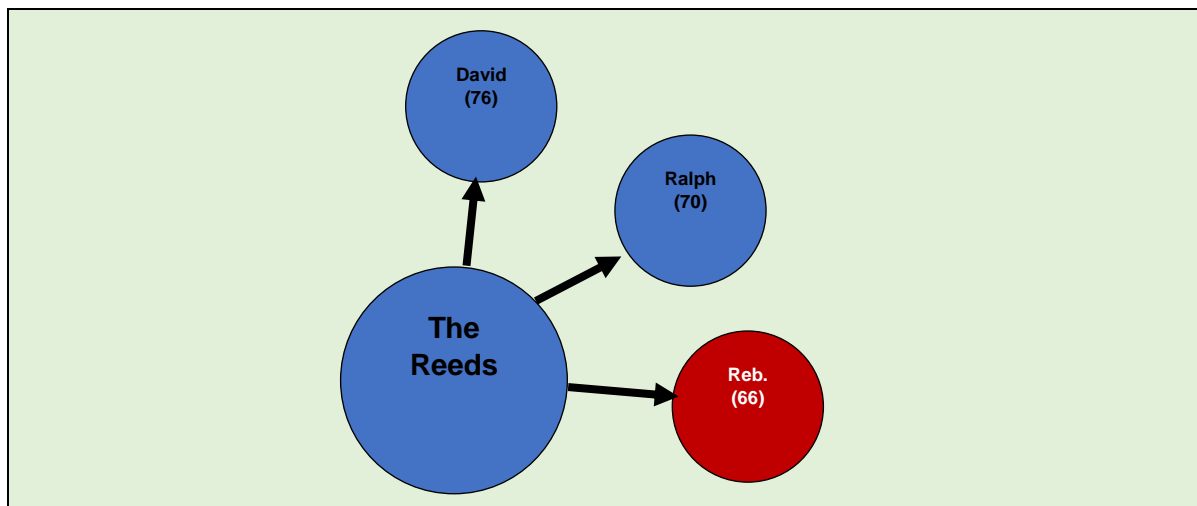


Len contact me after seeing my study poster on display in his village. The Peacocks had a happy childhood, playing outdoors. Their upbringing was family-oriented, spent with their mother's family. Conflict was rare, although Harriet recalls some "*mean*" yet "*normal brotherly behaviour.*" Harriet is equally close to both her siblings, whereas Edith emphasises sisterhood. They all recall different parental treatment, due to position in the sibling group and gender. Their lives diverged once at work, although they travelled and lived together until Len married and started a family. By the time he had divorced and become a single parent, Edith and Harriet had emigrated together and married abroad. When their father died, Len and his widowed mother became close and she helped him to raise his children. Conflict occurred when their mother died, temporarily. Edith and Harriet did not foresee the long-term impact of emigrating, a source of sadness and regret. They have always been emotionally close, and have drawn closer to Len over the last fifteen years due to greater availability of time and realising how important family is. The sisters exchange support and call Len for emotional support. Len feels similarly about emotional support, but distance is a barrier to tangible support. Regular contact via telephone occurs. They all reveal admiration and fondness and regret that they are not together.

The Reed siblings: Rebecca, David, and Ralph

The Reed siblings are group of three siblings, two brothers and a sister.

Figure 6.9: The Reed siblings

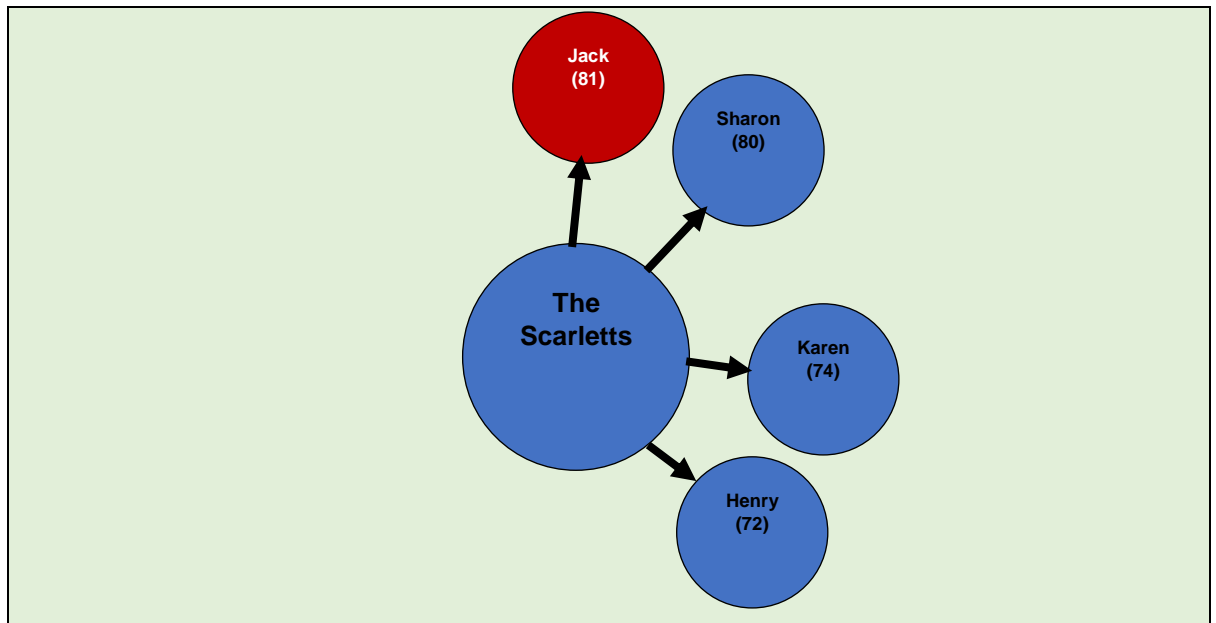


Rebecca was recruited via my professional network. The Reeds recall spending little time together growing up, as they had different interests and friendships. David recalls a cultural gap when he was working while his siblings were still at school. During all of the siblings' early married years, contact lessened. Their mother expected men to marry into their wives' families. When their father died prematurely they recall gathering regularly at their mother's, but went their separate ways after she died. Rebecca returned to education and married and divorced several times. David spent more time with his in-laws who he lived near to. The Reeds describe conflicts, and some loss of contact, which they feel are normal. Ralph has retired and moved abroad, whilst Rebecca and David now live in close proximity. Rebecca and David have experienced increased contact and closeness. Ralph and Rebecca feel that all three of them are closer now. They admire each other's independence and resilience. Although Ralph has not needed support, the others would willingly provide it. Ralph and Rebecca feel that they supported David when his wife died. David recalls encouragement rather than support. Rebecca appreciates practical support received from David when she moved house. They attribute feeling closer to being on their own, becoming more appreciative, recognising the importance of family more, and having time.

The Scarlett siblings: Jack, Henry, Sharon and Karen

The Scarlett siblings are a group of four siblings, two brothers and two sisters.

Figure 6.10: The Scarlett siblings

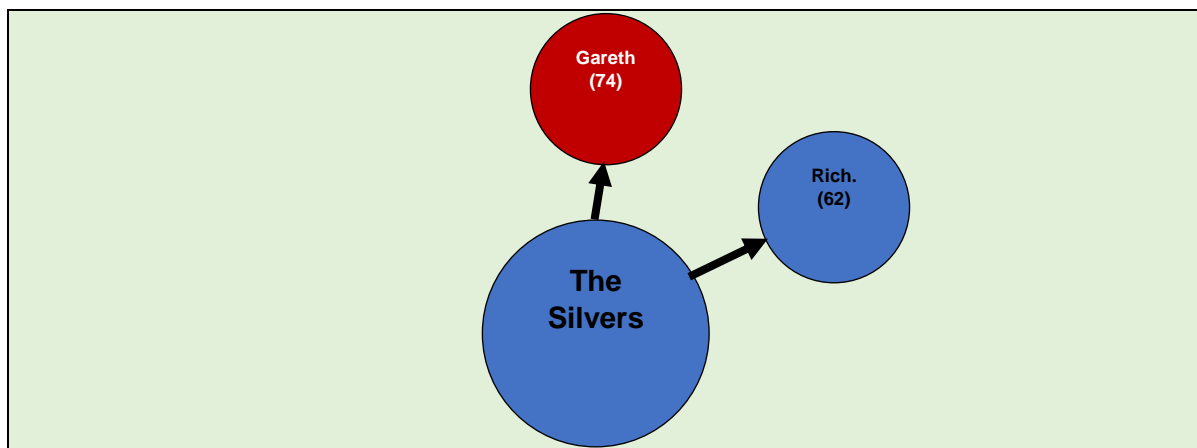


Jack responded to my post on an Alumni forum. The Scarlett siblings' difficult upbringing, when they experienced downward social mobility and stigmatism, affected their earlier relationships. Sharon, burdened by caring and household duties, lacked normal friendships, whilst Jack became distanced as he pursued his interests and education. The younger siblings' earlier relationship was fraught at times. Karen's resentment over Henry being favoured, caused him to withdraw. Jack admits he emigrated to escape the past, as well as pursue career opportunities. Henry spent time travelling and out of contact. As teenagers, the sisters bonded. Karen describes Sharon emigrating as a wrench. Relationship dynamics have changed considerably. Jack has mellowed and has a close, confiding relationship with Karen, becoming "*better and better friends as life has gone on.*" The sisters want a close confiding relationship, but struggle to achieve it. Henry is independent and seems unaware of how fond his siblings are of him. The brothers reflect on their sisters' "*raw deal*" earlier in life with sadness. Henry feels he and Jack get on well when they talk alone together, and Jack regrets not paying Henry more attention earlier in life. Despite feeling "*dysfunctional*" they view each other as important and regret the geographical distance between them.

The Silver siblings: Gareth and Richard

The Silver siblings are a brother-brother pair.

Figure 6.11: The Silver siblings

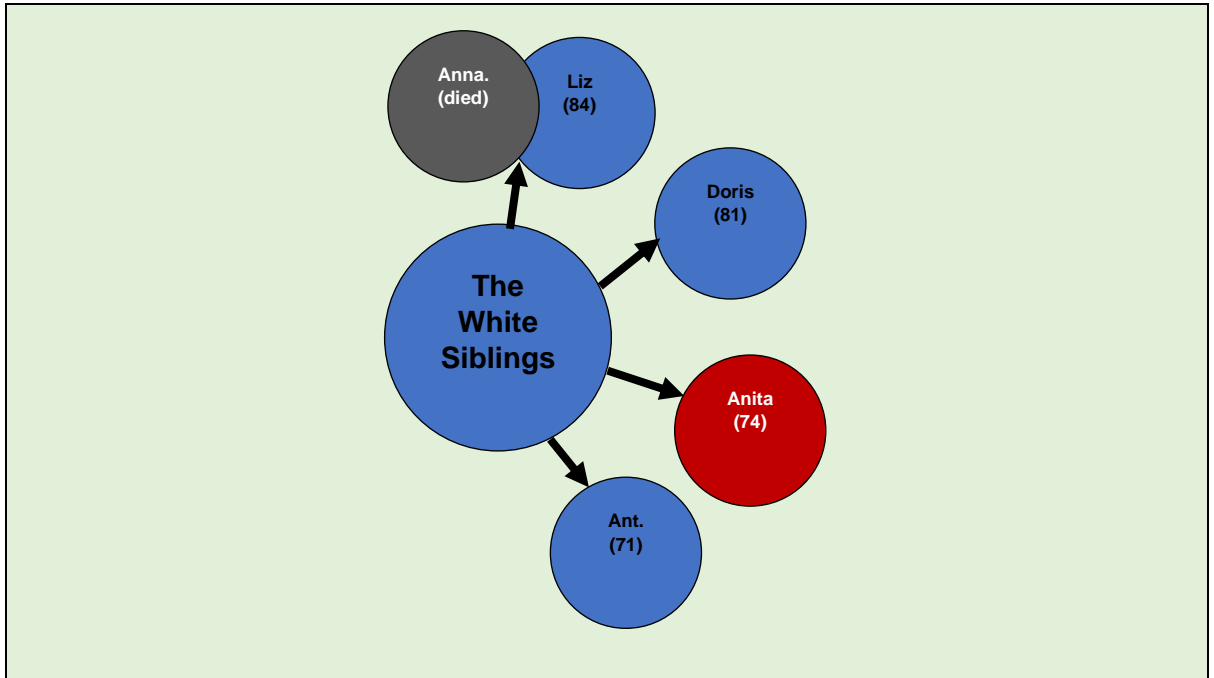


Gareth responded to my post on an alumni forum. Both brothers described how their parents' problematic relationship resulted in them being separated, not reconnecting until Richard was eighteen. There are differences in their narratives due to the ages at which they were separated. In their early years, Gareth was instrumental in Richard's development. They spent time together whilst their parents argued. Gareth described a strong emotional attachment between them, but Richard struggles to recall feelings, noting that Gareth was a "*floating memory*". Gareth showed strength of character while he waited for an opportunity to contact Richard. Richard was powerless to change the situation. He ignored his father's negative accounts and remained loyal to his good opinion of Gareth. From the moment they reconnected, regular visiting began based on their mother's routine. They describe each other's admirable qualities and moments of reciprocal support and encouragement. Gareth describes an amicable relationship with no tensions. Richard's account is similar regarding the earlier years following their reconnection, but with maturity, he developed some different opinions to Gareth. Gareth perceives less change. He has a strong sense of wanting to look out for his brother who he is extremely proud of. Both brothers are proud that their relationship endured despite earlier adversity. Overall, they place importance in the relationship, feel confident that they could rely on each other for support and spoke with warmth, admiration and respect about each other.

The White siblings: Anita, Anthony, Doris and Elizabeth

The White siblings are four siblings, from an original five sibling group.

Figure 6.12: The White siblings



Anita responded to my post on an alumni forum. The White siblings have experienced a lot of change. The close age-gap cemented the younger siblings' bonds because they lived abroad whilst the elder siblings were at boarding schools in England. Although separated at times, they all remained interested in each other, reconnected during holidays, and maintained contact in between. They describe parental relationships as distant, to varying degrees, and their late sister as intimidating. Moving as adults, due to careers, marriages and re-marriages, produced circumstantial changes in alliances. They all anchor their narratives in time and place and have an unusual and fascinating history. Doris has become increasingly "*separate*", whilst Elizabeth and Anthony have a close alliance based on shared attitudes and having other important relationships within close proximity to each other. The sisters describe Anthony and his wife as the core the family. The Whites are proud of their shared political views. They describe sporadic minor tensions in their relationships, but also express solidarity, pride, and deep love and affection for one another. They are grounded enough to recognise that minor tensions arise from concern not animosity.

6.3 Conclusion

The participating sibling groups are diverse in size, structure and background, and comprise a mix of same-sex and mixed-sex sibling groups. Their brief family portraits provide a context in order to enable the findings to be better understood. Changes in relationship dynamics occurred in response to life events such as leaving home and marriage. Multiple narratives highlight changes in feelings and, sometimes, in alliances and allow a rounded picture of each group to be gained because siblings recall events differently, or recall different events. However, threading through each family portrait are consistent views and a measure of agreement which, together, contribute to an impression of which aspects of the relationship are important to all siblings in the group. These aspects are discussed further in Chapter Seven when the reasons that participants feel make sibling relationships important to them are presented, and in Chapter Eight which considers the myriad of changes that participants describe in their sibling relationships over the life-course. Chapter Nine provides the context in which later life sibling relationships were formed.

Chapter Seven: The importance and nature of later life sibling relationships

7.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the question of how participants view their sibling relationship currently, and highlights some benefits that their sibling relationships confer in later life (research question one). Within this chapter I introduce the concept of “*re-negotiation*”, showing how siblings continue to navigate and negotiate their relationships with each other in later life (research question three). I also consider some of the main factors that mediate sibling relationships in later life. Where relevant, I draw attention to differences that relate to gender, a discussion which will be continued in the chapters that follow (research question four).

I begin this chapter by considering what importance participants place on their sibling relationships currently. As discussed in Chapters Two (page 34) and Three (page 47), the peer-like nature of sibling relationships, and the move towards smaller family sizes, are predicted to promote intense sibling relationships. However, increasing maternal age and associated fertility issues, career pressures, child-care costs and personal choice may still result in wide age spacing between siblings. Furthermore, increased life expectancy means that even siblings spaced apart in age can potentially share more than sixty years of life. That families with wide age spacing between the eldest and youngest siblings are present in Western society, merits paying attention to both peer-like and caretaker-like sibling relationships.

In Chapter Three (pages 48-49), I also drew attention to previous research emphasis on the role that siblings play in reminiscence, and in compensating for relationship losses in later life. However, other ways in which sibling relationships are important in later life are little explored. Thus, in this chapter I address this gap by considering: why participants identify

sibling relationships as important relationships; whether sibling relationships take on increased meaning in later life; what factors mediate sibling relationships in later life; and whether adaptations are taking place, and what kinds of adaptations are taking place.

7.1 The importance of sibling relationships

Interview and background data show that participants identify siblings as important family relationships for a significant proportion of the life-course, including later life. Despite changing circumstances, participants' interest in their siblings is maintained, even during periods of low contact. Few participants describe siblings as unimportant now, even those whose sibling relationships waned in importance earlier in life.

As I consider in Chapter Three (pages 66-67), changing family structures resulting from more frequent marital breakdown and reformation; an increase in the proportion of people who do not have children; and those without siblings: means that the number of people with no biological siblings will grow in the future. However, little is known about how more diverse family practices will affect future cohorts of older adults and whether some functions of sibling relationships can potentially be provided by friends or cousins. I find that the fact that participants identify *shared family history and biological heritage* as important features of sibling relationships, means that there is no substitute for sibling relationships. The unique features that Jack Scarlett identifies, for instance, make sibling relationships irreplaceable:

"They're the only people with whom you can go back generations, talk about grandfathers and great grandfathers [...] you would never do that of course with a friend, and that's the sort of thing that you wouldn't get into. This does represent what I mean when I said that the sibling friendship is a sort of a different category from other friendships."

Participants from the Bennett, Black, Brown, Peacock, Scarlett and White sibling groups, in particular, identify that sharing an interest in, and knowledge of, past family members and family history are important talking points. Some participants describe tracing their family history as a hobby and enjoy sharing and discussing their discoveries with their siblings.

In addition, some participants identify common physical characteristics, attributes and mannerisms as important, which are features that only common genetic heritage provides. Diana Brown believes sibling relationships are more important than friendships because siblings are: *“your own flesh and blood.”* Her use of the term *“own”* evokes a sense of belonging and *“flesh and blood”* emphasises the biological link. So, physical family traits are an aspect of genetic heritage that participants highlight and admire, and which makes them feel connected to, and comfortable with, each other. Liz Brown, the only member of the Brown sibling group who *“moved away”* is reconnecting with all of her siblings in later life. Her sister Charlotte describes how their time apart seems to melt away when they are together, which she attributes to a sense of familiarity that sharing characteristics induces:

“It’s funny to see somebody sitting there with your mannerisms [...] I think “I do that” and after she’d been here twenty-four hours, it was like, well like we’d never bin apart [...] so that must be [significant]. No matter how much you think you’re different and you’re wotsit, you’re not are you?”

Although participants found this concept difficult to articulate, it hinges on the familiarity that similar appearances, mannerisms, or specific family traits subconsciously provide and which enhance feelings of familiarity and belonging. Furthermore, as well as looking alike, most participants and their siblings sound alike, often using the same turns of phrase and retaining accents, even if they moved away from the area which they were brought up in.

Related to the notion that sibling relationships, as important family relationships, are linked to each other biologically and physically, is that they also connect each other to wider family relationships, and therefore have common family relationships within their individual social networks. Physical connection to, and shared understanding of, wider family context seems to enhance participants' perceptions of the importance of sibling relationships as family ties. This is particularly true for those ageing without children, a few of whom now, in later life, would have no other family relationships if they had no siblings. Thus, as discussed next, sibling relationships provide important links to both past and future generations.

Sibling relationships, when seen within wider family context, are a main source of *ongoing connections to other family relationships*. Participants who never experienced grandparent relationships, for instance, appreciate now in later life, with time to reflect, that their parents' siblings were important substitutes for this missing family tie. Furthermore, they are still benefitting from those connections. When their parents maintained close sibling relationships close connections to cousins were facilitated through relationships with aunts and uncles and remain important for some participants now. For example, Hilary Coal benefits from having a sibling-like relationship with her cousins because, like her, they enjoy family gatherings and they compensate for the fact that her brother Liam prefers a "*warm yet distant*" sibling relationship and describes himself as "*not family-oriented*."

Connecting to younger family members via their siblings is important to participants too. Members of the Bennett, Brown, Black, and Green, Reed, and White sibling groups, value niece and nephew relationships highly. Carolyn Green, for example, highlights how her sister Anthea gains, as a result of their sibling relationship, from the close relationship that she experiences with Carolyn's own sons:

“[My younger son’s] very close to Anthea [...] he texts her when he thinks she’s a bit down or something like that, so she has that. And my eldest son, to me, always seemed like he was her son [...] he was the first one to arrive and she’s always been close to him.”

Two participants who are ageing without children specifically mention the importance of their siblings’ children. Ralph Reed became involved in his nephew, Aiden’s, upbringing when Rebecca became a single parent. Although Ralph now lives abroad, the importance of his relationship with Aiden has been maintained, and Aiden stays with him every year. Sharon Scarlett too delights in her important ongoing relationship with her nephew, who represents an important link to future generations of family:

“Henry’s son Stuart came here [...] with his girlfriend and they stayed here and I’ve always kept in touch with him, and I told him to keep his eye open, coz one day he’d have an eighty-year old backpacker knocking on his door. Well actually, I was seventy-eight when I finally did that. The thing was that I’ve always corresponded with them and [...] I stayed with them when I went there [...] baby was on the way, you know [...] They sent me photographs and I’ve sent him little presents, and I’m corresponding with him, with their baby [...] I’m very pleased I can because I don’t have a lot to do with little kids now you know.”

Gareth Silver’s relationship with his brother Richard extends beyond their relationship to numerous other family relationships who are important to him, and who he describes as always in his thoughts. Therefore, participants benefit from their sibling relationships through the connections they provide to other family members. Moreover, sharing a concern for the younger generation is something that participants and their siblings come together over, giving them an enhanced sense of having an invested interest in the wider family. Anthony White, for example, has a particularly close relationship with Doris’s grandchildren

and Elizabeth White is close to Anthony's son, both geographically and emotionally. As a result of age gaps between the older and younger White siblings, Anthony explains that his niece, Scarlett, who is of his generation, provides a vital link between him and his sister Doris:

"I'm thinking particularly of Scarlett who we'll be seeing this weekend. She's both our generation, we talk about what our children are doing and all that sort of thing and although she's only a little older than our children we feel she's [...] how we connect with Doris, and so I think it's not just with the siblings, but it's their families, those ones that we have contact with."

Thus, siblings enhance participants' pool of family relationships by connecting them to an extended family network.

As well as fulfilling a role in later life in their capacity as an important family relationship, participants also value sibling relationships because some aspects of them are akin to friendship, and some participants feel that their *sibling relationships are special friendships*. Moreover, many participants describe siblings as *"more special"* than their closest friends. Carl Black's view that friendships need to be worked at is fairly typical. He notes by way of contrast that: *"A good brother-sister relationship is just something that's naturally there, right from very, very tiny, and there's just a natural togetherness..."* The ease with which Carl describes the Blacks' sibling relationships are corroborated by his siblings. For instance, Frank uses the terms *"comfort"* and *"constant"* to illustrate the meaning of his sibling relationships in later life. Thus, the Black and also the Bennett, Brown and Green siblings, in particular, feel more at ease with siblings than friends, because they feel linked to them and have a wealth of shared experiences and family connections.

Participants who associate their siblings with feelings of security and comfort do so because of the longevity of their sibling relationships and their shared upbringing. Moreover, Belinda Black's siblings are her best friends and *"the ones I would go to first"* if she needed anything. Many participants feel that siblings are irreplaceable whereas friendships are not. As Charlotte Brown illustrates, sometimes good sibling relationships reduce the need for friendships:

"You don't have to [...] make the effort [...] You've always got somebody there [...] you're never lonely [...] I have got lots of friends, but sometimes because you've got so many brothers and sisters you don't feel you need to go out of your way to make friends."

Charlotte Brown is one of many participants whose social life revolves around her siblings nowadays, following retirement and the death her husband. Even participants who value long-term friendships and see their friends often, such as Abigail Bennett, place sibling relationships above these close, long-term friendships. Abigail explains: *"I've got a very special relationship with them, but even so, the loving relationship with Mark is closer, far closer."* In addition to this greater sense of love and affection that Abigail Bennett highlights, higher levels of trust and confiding between siblings sets sibling relationships above friendships for many participants, as Anthea Green's narrative illustrates:

"In the whole world the one person who'll tell me the truth, who won't agree with me unless she does agree with me, who isn't frightened to tell me the truth will be me sister [...] she would never ever, ever, disclose anything confidential."

Having many things in common with siblings is another benefit of sibling relationships compared to friendships where only one or two interests might be shared. For instance, Anthea Green feels that her and Carolyn are on the same wavelength because they share similar interests. Anthea's phrase that her and Carolyn: *"share the same thoughts and opinions"* too, is similar to the way in which Elizabeth White explains *"I feel of a piece with*

Doris” when referring to her relationship with her sister. Anita White elaborates on the concept of commonality when she describes how the White’s sibling relationships are cemented by being “*for the right cause*” over things that really matter, something which as Anita explains further, all of the White siblings agree that they share:

“One of the things that brings us all together is feeling that we are, uhm, A, atheists, B, socialist, and that we were brought up that way, and it’s been a sort of a common thread throughout the whole of our lives [...] we might have minor differences as to where we stand on particular issues [...] but we’re absolutely on the same side in that way, unquestioningly.”

Another benefit of sibling relationships which makes them special is their longevity which, as participants highlight, tends to outlast friendships. Participants indicate that they only truly appreciate this in later life when reflecting on their sibling relationships and comparing them to other relationships. Anthony White’s view of the transient nature of friendships compared to sibling relationships is fairly typical. He notes:

“I think it’s different obviously to friendships [...] and in a sense your siblings [...] they don’t go away. Some friendships wane, for any number of reasons, you know. You don’t acquire new siblings. You acquire new friends. Not that many as you get older.”

So, another benefit of sibling relationships which participants identify is their staying power. This is why Karen Scarlett concludes that sibling relationships are more enduring and reliable than friendships, as friendships: “*can be quite close, because of the circumstances, and then they change [...] they just sort of drift.*” Karen makes a valid point, because now in later life other participants reflect on the fact that even if their sibling relationships waned earlier in the life-course their interest and connection was always maintained. Thus, when

circumstances allow, or needs arise, their sibling relationships seemed to be renewed effortlessly. Furthermore, some participants do not feel that sibling relationships wane at all. Thus, the majority of participants view sibling relationships as more important than friendships due to greater levels of mutual understanding, trust, reliability and endurance. In later life, this seems equally true of same-sex sibling relationships e.g. Anthea and Carolyn Green, Frank and Carl Black, and opposite-sex sibling relationships e.g. Abigail and Mark Bennett, Anthony and Elizabeth White.

A somewhat different take on this is provided by Harriet Peacock who points out that the two relationship types can in fact blend: *"You can be friends with your siblings as well, you know [...] Edith and I are very close actually because we're friends."* Similarly, Jack Scarlett describes overlap between sibling relationships and friendships, based on the similarity of particular functions. Although Jack describes sibling relationships as unique in terms of shared history and biological heritage, he also believes: *"The sibling relationship is a sort of a different category from a personal friendship, but they can probably fill very much the same function"*. Interestingly, in terms of his personal experience, when Jack needed support recently, his sister fulfilled that function, not his friends. This is because the provision of emotional support and advice is a function that Jack, amongst others, feels is better fulfilled by a sibling and this relates to the higher levels of confiding and trust between siblings discussed above. Furthermore, participants who rely on friends for practical support, and siblings for emotional support and advice, are usually not proximate to their siblings. Therefore, when barriers to seeing their siblings in person arise in later life, some participants have to rely on friends to meet practical or social support needs even if a sibling might have been preferred.

It should also be noted that a small number of participants did not describe their siblings as more important than friendships at this point in their lives. For instance, Rebecca Reed, Len Peacock, Henry Scarlett and Liam Coal describe friendships as equally or more important

than sibling relationships in later life. It is noticeable that these four participants either lack available siblings, and/or do not have same-sex siblings. As will be discussed further in Chapter Eight (pages 211-212), there are different expectations amongst these participants about the role of sisters compared to brothers as providers of companionship and support. Rebecca, for instance, prefers to rely on friends for emotional support and feels that her brothers fulfil a more sociable and practical function. In addition, one of Rebecca's brothers lives abroad and so is not as available to her as she would like. Similarly, both of Len Peacock's sisters live abroad having emigrated together in their early thirties. Therefore, despite his family-oriented upbringing, Len has relied on long-term male friends for socialising and practical support, but values his sisters highly for emotional support, which is why he views friendships as being of equal importance to sibling relationships. Similarly, Henry Scarlett's older siblings emigrated before he reached adulthood and his younger sister is not proximate either so, like Rebecca Reed, he feels that same-sex friendships can fulfil an important role in later life. However, Henry also highlights that close friendships are harder to form nowadays.

A unique perspective amongst these participants is provided by Liam Coal who is alone in his view that sibling relationships are more obligatory. Liam feels that because sibling relationships are so long-term they are liable to "go wrong" under pressure. He views it as natural for siblings to develop their own lives and places more importance on friendships, noting:

"I suspect that friendships have always been more important than sibling relationships [...] not to everybody, but to most people, as sibling relationships are very long term."

Although Liam's view that sibling relationships are obligatory seems unique, other participants reveal, albeit in a less conscious way, that obligatory mechanisms, as well as voluntary mechanisms, are important in keeping siblings connected during periods when

other life-course needs are prioritised. Overall, most male and female participants identify both same and opposite-sex sibling relationships as important later life relationships. They benefit from their sibling relationships because they feel linked to them, and identify them as key family relationships and special types of friends. Next, I consider whether participants feel that their sibling relationships in fact become more important in later life.

7.2 Do sibling relationships become more important in later life?

The majority of participants highlight that their sibling relationships are more important to them now, in later life, for several reasons. First, due to the longevity of sibling relationships they provide a sense of continuity for many participants, remaining stable while other relationships change. For example, friendships may drift; adult children may become less available; or spouses may have died. Second, attitudes towards siblings can change, as part of a dual process of becoming more tolerant with age, and realising that the number of years left together is diminishing. Third, sibling relationships take on new meaning because of their adaptable nature which is responsive to changing needs in later life. Each of these reasons is discussed in more detail next.

Some participants identify that *sibling relationships provide a sense of continuity*. For example, the Black and the Brown siblings perceive little change in the importance of their sibling relationships, because contact routines established under the influence of their mothers' earlier in life are still present and well maintained as will be discussed further in Chapter Eight (pages 195-196). Another reason why the Black and Brown siblings feel a strong sense of continuity is the stability of the whole sibling group. Because most of the siblings are proximate, gather regularly, make adjustments to include siblings who cannot attend regular gatherings, and/or share news with distant siblings, they all remain engaged with the sibling group as a whole. Furthermore, the sense of comfort which some

participants experience when they slide naturally into their old, familiar relationships after periods of lower involvement, is a product of the longevity of sibling relationships which provides an impression of continuity. Diana Brown describes this as *“returning to the fold”* and Liz Brown as sibling relationships *“getting back on track”* in later life.

This impression that the longevity of sibling relationships promotes stability and continuity in the face of change, is particularly applicable to larger families who are accommodating in their relationships now because their family-oriented upbringings promoted sharing. Their larger family size also necessitated them having to be adaptable, which became a life-long habit. The youngest Black sibling, Alison, describes recent adaptations to accommodate her older siblings' changing physical abilities, during their recent family holiday:

“Apart from the mixed ages, we’ve now got mixed abilities, because of, you know, different illnesses that have happened and [...] just err the older ones getting older, but [...] there’s like fourteen of us go away, and we’re all together for breakfast, we’re all together for evening meal, but we’re comfortable enough to say, “this is what we want to do today. Who wants to join us?” And some will go off and do, you know, a big walk. Some will go off and just potter. Some will go into, you know, one of the villages, and do a bit of shopping, or, you know, and we all feel comfortable with that.”

Thus, being adaptable and flexible enables the Black siblings to continue enjoying time together as a complete sibling group, despite changes in some siblings' physical abilities. As Carl Black notes: *“just being together”* is more important nowadays than what they actually do together.

The White siblings, as Anita White explains, have always, despite changes in geographical proximity, maintained an interest in one another which keeps them important to each other now. Anita describes them as: *“all very engaged with each other, very interested in what each of us do.”* In fact, Anita refers to Anthony, her sibling nearest in age, as *“a constant”* in her life as *“he was very important to me and still is.”* As Elizabeth White demonstrates, sibling relationships remain important *“even when we’ve not seen each other for quite a long time”* if they remain aware of what is happening to each other. It is noticeable from their accounts that all of the White siblings are adept at recalling events that happened to the others which they themselves were not present at. This is because they have always kept up-to-date with each other’s news.

The White siblings’ narratives also reinforce the concept introduced above that the connectedness of the entire sibling group provides a continuum, within which individual relationships can wax and wane. Although the White siblings anchor their narratives in time and place, they emphasise a continuous connection and shared life together too. Despite changes occurring from time to time, as Anthony White emphasises, sibling relationships *“keep going”* and this in itself makes them important:

“If you still have the sibling connections, they’re important by virtue of continuous connection and time. It’s in a slightly unromantic way, but it’s what Rachel and I find ourselves saying about our marriage. That, yes, you know, love and blah, blah, blah, but actually, what it is, it’s about a shared life together, and in a sense our siblings, as with our children, that’s what it is. They’re part of your life.”

Although areas of continuity are important in such long-standing relationships, change and adaptation to change emerge as important characteristics of participants’ sibling relationships in later life too. Moreover, it seems that the impression of continuity, which participants identify can actually result from gradual adaptations to changes which, though

subtle sometimes, happen nevertheless. Thus, stable aspects of participants' sibling relationships, such as having a fixed contact routine, create an impression of continuity even if other aspects, such as the nature of activities engaged in together, change. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Nine (pages 249-251), because siblings are generally present at key family moments, they gain significance as a dependable relationship in later life.

Most participants feel that their sibling relationships are taking on new meaning in later life. An important reason for this is the role that sibling relationships play in support and which receives more detailed attention in Chapter Eight. Another reason, discussed next, is because attitudes towards siblings change in later life as part of a process of becoming more accepting and tolerant. Changing attitudes, when combined with a fear of losing siblings, due to the loss of other significant relationships in later life, enhances the importance of sibling relationships.

Many participants referred to these *changes in attitude*, and what appears to be the *levelling effect of age* on their sibling relationships. Most participants feel that their sibling relationships are becoming more important, even those who always considered them to be highly important throughout life. The reasons for this include shared experience, being important companions in later life, and becoming more tolerant of each other in later life. In addition, participants' perceptions that age differences which formerly contributed to them seeming "*in different spaces*" (Charlotte Brown's description) to each other earlier in life, and which matter less nowadays, contribute to participants' sense that they have gained common ground with their siblings in later life.

In terms of increased tolerance in later life, Ralph Reed, who describes himself as “*more mellow*” towards his siblings nowadays, presents a typical view. Ralph recognises that he is more accepting of differences in opinion between him and his siblings, David and Rebecca. Ralph is therefore less inclined to fall out with them, and more inclined to value them for the friendship they provide now that he is older:

“I think it’s just a getting older process. I think that’s the main thing as you get older you think to yourself what’s the point in either falling out. You might as well get close together and try and be best of friends, and well that’s what we are.”

All three Reed siblings feel similarly. For example, David uses a similar expression to explain that he attributes the increasing importance of his sibling relationships to becoming “*more tolerant*.” Thus, some participants attribute positive changes in their sibling relationships to a shift in their own attitude, although their siblings’ narratives reveal that more than one person contributes to changes in emotional closeness and behaviour. For instance, Jack Scarlett who admits that he places greater value on his sibling relationships now, shows agency when he discusses his recent decision to improve his sibling relationships. As a result of reflecting deeply since retirement, Jack believes that he behaved selfishly towards his siblings earlier in life. Now Jack is less focused on himself, he is attempting to create positive changes in his sibling relationships. For instance, by being more considerate toward his sister Sharon:

“I thought that I really have to be nice to her [...] so I am [...] I think we get along better now, as I’m getting older. Maybe I’m getting less grumpy.”

Jack’s perception that he is “*getting less grumpy*” as part a process of becoming more tolerant, forms part of the explanation about why participants emphasise sibling relationships in later life. The other parts, due to changing need and siblings’ response to need, are introduced later (pages 170-173) and addressed further in Chapter Eight.

Although Jack's account gives the impression that his sibling relationships are better because *he* has become less grumpy, his siblings' perspectives provide further insight. Jack's three siblings corroborate his view that he is quite different nowadays to the rather detached brother they experienced earlier in life. According to Sharon, Jack is a "*kind*" and "*generous*" older brother. Karen describes a loving relationship between her and Jack, and Henry feels: "*He is so sentimental and so full of feeling now. I think this is a thing that happens as you get older. Your feelings rise to the surface.*"

Other participants who describe better sibling relationships due to increased tolerance in later life, include Edith Peacock. Edith feels that her relationship with Len has taken on renewed significance over the last fifteen years, which she attributes to being more mature in her attitude and recognising the importance of family in later life:

"I mean you finally grow up right and, hopefully you do, and, you know, you just look at things differently, and you know you realise that's your, you know, that's your family right, and they're, you know, they're there and, you know, really they're the most important people in your life or, you know, they should be, like."

Although the Peacock, Reed and Scarlett siblings describe attitude changes which led to the whole sibling group experiencing better relationships, in the White sibling group, recent changes in attitude are altering sibling alliances. Anthony and Elizabeth's strengthening alliance is due to a realisation that they have similar outlooks on life. Anthony feels: "*Elizabeth and I have a generally similar outlook on life [...] I am not dragged down by things and neither is Elizabeth.*" At the same time, Doris White admits she is becoming increasingly introspective. Doris reports "*making*" her siblings less important and having to be "*self-sufficient*." This is partly due to barriers to contact arising in later life, which are discussed later (see pages 182-184), and partly due to a diminishing self-belief. Doris's fear of being

a “*nuisance*” to people is restricting her ability to interact socially with her siblings and with other people. Elizabeth, who finds it difficult to get through to Doris nowadays, feels sad because Doris is “*someone quite different in a way.*” Also, Anita White admits that she is focussing on the past in a formal way in order to “*inform memories*” whereas Anthony, who shares much of her past, prefers to focus on present interests, something he does more with Elizabeth with whom, he has less shared past due to the age spacing between them. Thus, this re-forming of sibling alliances within the White sibling group, departs from their earlier alliances which were based on the contribution that age gaps and geographical proximity made to their opportunity to share life-experiences. As I will return to in Chapter Eight (pages 190-191), although shared life experience and reminiscing are considered to be important features of sibling relationship in later life, some participants focus more on having common ground currently because it provides opportunities to enjoy activities and relaxed conversation together. That is not to belittle the contribution of past shared experience, but supports the earlier finding (page 158) that older adults benefit from the friendship aspect of sibling relationships in later life, as well as the shared history which being a family provides.

Some participants also describe adaptations taking place in order to minimise differences and avoid tension. For instance, Robert Grey reports that he and his brother Adrian “*steer clear of issues we are likely to disagree on*” particularly religion, which is potentially divisive. Similarly, Richard Silver admits that he sometimes avoids getting into big debates with Gareth in order to “*just have a nice quiet lunch.*” The Green sisters prefer to emphasise each other’s positive points, despite their extremely different characters, and accepting a sibling’s different views is important to the Brown siblings. Felicity mentions that they never fall out because they prefer to “*just go along with one another*”. Their family culture of respecting each other’s choices, as Eric notes, makes them accepting of each other: “*I think that the main thing is, are you happy with that situation? Are you happy in that life? And if*

you are then we're happy for you." Thus, participants' narratives suggest that attitudes towards siblings can change as part of a process of maturing and becoming more tolerant, and participants who experience this process become closer emotionally to their siblings. Those participants who have not experienced this process yet, tend to be younger participants, or have only experienced this with particular siblings.

As highlighted in the family portraits presented in Chapter Six, there is wide age spacing between participants and their siblings within many sibling groups in this study, even those from small sibling groups such as the Silver brothers. Throughout their narratives, particularly when discussing their earlier childhood and early adulthood years, participants understandably often refer to age as having a shaping effect on the nature of their sibling relationships. It is interesting therefore that, in recent years, many participants note that age differences between them and their siblings matter far less than they used to. Thus, next I discuss this idea that *age becomes a leveller* as you get older.

As Elizabeth White explains, her relationship with both of her younger siblings mean more now because she notes that: *"Age disappears as you get older. Anita and Anthony became more and more important, and I absolutely adore them now, I really value their siblingship so much."* Thus, once age gaps appear less significant, sibling relationships appear more equal. For instance, Richard Silver now, by his own admission, is more fully formed in his opinions and better placed to challenge the opinions of a brother who, earlier in life, he revered as an authority on everything. Nowadays, Richard feels a degree of dissension is acceptable and normal: *"I've been much more prepared for us to argue about stuff, in a funny way we have, slightly, become closer."*

Anita White's narrative adds further insight into what amounts to a shift in the power balance within sibling relationships:

"I'm much less the younger sister now. I don't feel like a juvenile anymore. I feel as if I'm the person with sensible knowledge, ideas, you know, plans and so forth. So, I would feel as if I'm somebody who is competent to give advice."

Anthony White, who is Anita's age-peer, corroborates her view and also adds some insight regarding their older sisters' reactions to this change, because he senses some resistance from them:

"I feel in a sense they're really not enjoying the fact that the little brother is telling them not to be so silly, not to be so stupid, you know, when they're doing something silly or stupid."

Anthony, therefore, highlights that some changes are more acceptable to younger siblings than older ones. This is a theme I will return to in Chapter Eight when discussing changes in the balance of support exchange between older and younger siblings. So, sibling relationships can take on increased meaning in later life because participants' attitudes towards their siblings change in ways which are beneficial. As discussed, greater tolerance, acceptance and understanding promote harmonious relationships. Moreover, as age differences become less significant, the friendship aspect of the relationship can come to the fore, and sibling relationships can seem more peer-like once siblings feel equal and find more common ground.

However, although some participants consider age to be a leveller in ways which are beneficial, multiple narratives within sibling groups reveal that younger siblings are beginning to recognise and *respond to their older siblings changing needs*. Furthermore, some older siblings are concerned about their diminishing contribution, and wish they could

do more (see Chapter Eight, page 216). Within the majority of sibling groups, participants highlight that they are responding to a variety of changes in their siblings' needs. There are some exceptions because some of the younger participants have not needed sibling support in recent years, for instance the Coal siblings. Increased needs in later life result from a combination of physical changes and what Anthony White terms "*slightly dotty*" behaviour, or absentmindedness. Thus, although the relationship between siblings spaced widely in age can seem more equal and peer-like in later life, wide age gaps between siblings also induces concern from younger siblings about their older siblings' wellbeing.

Another important need that siblings respond to is that caused by an increase in relationship losses in later life. The loss of a spouse is an experience which has been found to contribute to sibling relationships taking on renewed meaning in later life (see Chapter Three, page 58), although I find this response to be more permanent in nature than previously reported. Many study participants explained how, with increasing age, multiple losses impact on attitudes towards other important people in their lives. Diana Brown described a need to draw those relationships you have left closer and make more of them. The notion that the loss of important relationships makes older adults value those that remain more is described by Carl Black who notes: "*The older you get [as] you start losing some friends and family, you realise just how precious life is, and how short it can be.*"

In later life, promoting the importance of close relationships that remain is coupled with participants' fear of losing their siblings. Although, as Anthea Green reveals, the realisation that "*one of us will go before the other*" seems "*inevitable*", it is also an unimaginable fear for most participants. Anthea cannot bear to "*imagine what it would be like losing my sister,*" and her sister Carolyn describes her fear of losing Anthea as her "*worst thought*". However, like many other participants, they realise it is something that one of them will have to face. The twelve-year age gap between the Silver brothers means that Richard is concerned about Gareth because "*he's that much older than me, therefore he might die before I do.*"

It seems that, particularly for younger participants with older siblings in their mid-eighties, the realisation that their sibling might die before them focusses attention on how important their sibling relationship is now. Mark Bennett adds that losing age-peers in general is “*hard to bear*” and is something that he and his sister, Abigail, share understanding about. This, coupled with recent health issues, stimulates mutual protectiveness, as Abigail explains:

“I’ve got to be very protective of him, especially since he’s been in hospital, just as when I needed him, he became very, very, protective towards me [...] I do sort of wonder whatever will happen when one of us loses the other.”

Although Mark joked about Abigail still acting as his “*big sister*” even though he is in his eighties too, her earlier role in his life is linked to his need to protect her and explained by the concept of reciprocity. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, Mark is one of several participants who feel that older/younger sibling roles reverse in later life as younger siblings feel concern or empathy about older ones. Such feelings arise in response to a sibling appearing more vulnerable, to declining health or to experiencing bereavement for instance.

Due to the longevity and flexibility of sibling relationships, participants inevitably describe changes in the nature of their sibling relationships across the life-course in response to changes in circumstance, priorities, attitudes, and the loss or gain of other important relationships. The overriding message participants deliver is that sibling relationships are still responsive to changes in later life. However, it is worth re-emphasising that, as discussed earlier in this chapter (pages 163-164), areas of continuity are important too. The multiple voices of participants from the Black and the Brown sibling groups reveal that a process of continually adapting is embedded within their sibling relationships, and Carolyn Green also concludes similarly when talking about her sibling relationship: “*I mean to me yes it changed, but it’s still a very special relationship.*”

Changes in attitude towards siblings only form part of the explanation about why participants' sibling relationships are more important now. Attitude shifts are the result of changes in circumstances and form part of a process which can, for example, trigger compensatory mechanisms in response to changing needs. Changes in attitude are linked to changes in emotional closeness and changes in behaviour (e.g. support and contact). Although continuity and stability are important aspects of sibling relationships which provide a sense of comfort and reassurance in later life, a myriad of influences impact on sibling relationships. For instance, some changes in circumstance which participants are experiencing in later life add to, or sometimes detract from, the importance of their sibling relationships. Some of these changes, and life-course events that appear to mediate them, are considered next.

7.3 Life events and transitions which mediate sibling relationships in later life

Life-course transitions such as retirement and widowhood, and factors which detrimentally effect the availability of time or create barriers to personal contact (e.g. ill-health, financial concerns, caring duties, difficulty travelling), can affect the functioning of sibling relationships in later life. Furthermore, the longevity of some life-course transitions which began earlier in participants' lives, such as long-term marriages, parenthood and geographical distance, continue to influence their sibling relationships in later life.

Some participants find that *retirement* allows them more time to spend with their siblings. For instance, Liz and Felicity Brown describe how the Brown siblings' relationships increased in importance once their sister Olive retired, because Olive began visiting Felicity regularly, telephoning Liz routinely, and also visiting Liz as part of her annual holiday. The other Brown sisters joined this routine as they retired and this intensified further when, one by one, they became widows.

For Jack Scarlett, who is geographically distant from his siblings, retirement facilitated a switch in focus from career ambitions to family relationships. During his career years he felt focused on trying to succeed and recalls being *“short of sleep generally”* and not having time to think a great deal about his sibling relationships. The benefit of retirement that Jack identifies is that it has given him time to *“consider”* his siblings now and, as discussed earlier (page 167), since retiring, Jack’s attitude towards his siblings has changed which has resulted in his sibling relationships taking on new meaning.

However, not all participants in the study are retired yet and not all female participants pursued careers. So, these participants identify that changes in commitments towards younger family members also alter the time that participants have to spend with their siblings. Although retirement and having less commitments towards younger family members gives some participants more time to spend with their siblings, other changes that occur in later life can restrict sibling relationships because they reduce the availability of time. In particular, for some participants retirement from work has been replaced with *caring duties and other family responsibilities*.

Factors which reduce the availability of time to spend with siblings include grandparenthood, which, depending on the level of involvement, can focus attention away from siblings. Carl Black’s account of how, over the years, involvement with intergenerational relationships ebbs and flows in a way which alters the available time to spend with siblings, is fairly typical:

“I think you get so involved in your own little nuclear family to not quite have the same amount of time and care for the wider family, but you know the interest’s always there with them. As you get married, then get families which can take up time [...] then they grow up and that eases for a bit, but then they get married and you have grandchildren and you’re back busy again.”

Adrian Grey mentions that his brother Robert is less available because he has grandchildren in different parts of the country:

“He’s now got grandchildren, which is extremely demanding. He’s baby sitting up in London you know quite often [...] [he has] grandchildren to look after and they are back in Bristol as well [...] his time is really very fully occupied.”

Some participants are caring for an ill spouse, or did so prior to their transition into widowhood. Intense caring duties leave little time to invest in other relationships which can create a sense of helplessness amongst some siblings. Sharon Scarlett mentions how her brother Jack was having a very difficult time when she stayed with him:

“There were things he had to do in the house so that carers could come in, because of all the health and safety. I mean they couldn’t lift her around like he does, that sort of thing, and I think he was just generally a little bit hassled and also all these people around because he was spending about four or five hours a day altogether looking after Maureen and having the others. I think he wanted to be Mein Host but he just couldn’t coz he hadn’t got the energy, you know.”

However, siblings are often well placed to comfort and support each other at such times due to high levels of empathy and understanding. They may also be more available to provide emotional support than adult children who have career and family commitments. How caring duties elicit sibling support will be discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Because many participants are in long-term marriages, the effect of *marriage* on sibling relationships is both long-standing and current. However, some participants found the effect of marriage on their sibling relationships difficult to separate from transitions that happened at the same time, particularly geographical moves away from their siblings. In later life, the

current effects of long-term marriage seem to be influenced by family culture (participants' and spouses' families) and geographical proximity. For example, the Black and the Brown siblings believe that marriage does not change emotional closeness, because their in-laws became integrated into the family and are viewed as siblings. Their family culture means that marriage in fact extends the sibling group, as Eric Brown notes:

"It isn't just my siblings. Their husbands or wives have always been included [...] there's never been any aspect of "them and us" [...] my parents always involved our spouses in anything that's going on. So, the family has only actually grown."

The Black siblings also consider in-laws to belong to the sibling group and, since retirement, the Black siblings and their spouses go on an annual holiday together. Furthermore, the Brown siblings have little experience and the Black siblings no experience at all, of changes in marital partners. Alison Black views her in-laws as: *"my extended family"* who feel *"just as close"* as her siblings, because *"I've known [them] all my life. I couldn't remember a time without them."* Participants from the Brown, Black and Peacock sibling groups also refer to siblings' spouses as either siblings or best friends and Abigail Bennett notes enthusiastically: *"you love your sister-in-law, don't you?"*

Another long-term effect of marriage, for participants who show high levels of unity with their spouses, is that sibling relationships are mediated by their spouses. For example, Anthony White's phrase: *"I see it very much as Rachel and me, together, very concerned for Elizabeth"* illustrates how he and his wife act together. His sisters also mention that knowing Anthony as part of a couple throughout his adult life is significant. They rarely refer to him individually.

Anita White emphasises that having a sibling in a long-term marriage contributes stability to the sibling group as a whole:

“He’s always been a constant and is the only one of us who has a sustained marriage, with a successful marriage [...] The person who is really important to us, is Rachel you see, Anthony’s wife, and she is as part of the family. She’s completely there for us all.”

This raises an interesting point which Richard Silver’s narrative elaborates on: many sibling relationships are experienced as a relationship between the participant and “them as a couple.” Richard Silver articulates particularly well the difficulty of establishing how you really feel about a sibling who has been married for so long:

“They have always acted as a unit, Hilary and Gareth, in a way that that is unusual actually. [...] a lot of the time, they are like one person [...] It’s quite funny, because that makes it very complicated to think what you actually think. Your question, you know, your basic thing, my relationship with my brother...”

Richard’s account of rarely spending time alone with Gareth is fairly typical of married men’s accounts amongst these study participants:

“I’ve spent very little time alone with him, very little actually, and I don’t know that it matters, but it obviously affects the relationship, not necessarily in a bad way, it just makes it different.”

Henry Scarlett feels similarly about his relationship with his brother Jack. Because Jack married early in life and emigrated at the same time, Henry notes how few opportunities he has had to spend time with Jack alone. However, as will be discussed in Chapter Nine,

married sisters who remained proximate spent time together without their spouses whilst raising children or working together. As discussed later widowhood is described as returning some participants relationships to being siblings again.

Although some participants' family cultures mean that marriage extends the sibling group when siblings-in-law join the family, the Reed siblings experienced the opposite effect. They believe that being adopted into a spouse's family weakens connections with their own siblings. Ralph Reed actually refers to his brother David's in-laws as "*his own relatives*" during his narrative. Because, according to Rebecca Reed, the Reed family culture meant that men were expected to "*marry out*" of their own family and David's wife had close connections to her family, David spent more time with her siblings during his married years than his own siblings. However, as will be discussed further in Chapter Eight, once David became a widower his sibling relationships came to the fore.

Another long-term effect of marriage, which a small number of participants raise, is that ongoing tension between them and a sibling's marital partner is causing sensitivity in their sibling relationships. Participants who experience problematic relationships with a sibling's spouse, or between their own spouse and their sibling, tend to avoid direct confrontation. The most common strategy is to separate the two relationships by visiting siblings when spouses are absent. Problems with a sibling's spouse are expressed sensitively, for example, "*a little bit of distance has been created*" and rarely forthrightly.

Another way of coping with tension is not to question their sibling's defence of their sibling-in-law's behaviour. Through the accounts of more than one sibling, it becomes evident that participants work hard to maintain civility between a sibling and spouse, to the extent that they sometimes experience discomfort themselves:

“In my relationships with [my sibling] now, I would say I feel myself to be in a slight eternal triangle [...] I have an understanding that there are some things that I do with [my sibling], and talk to about with [my sibling], and [my spouse] doesn’t take part [...] but it’s slightly uncomfortable for me.”

Jealousy, insecurity and possessive behaviour are cited as reasons for tension arising between participants and siblings-in-law or, from the other perspective, participants’ spouses and siblings. In the latter case, participants offer little insight, reporting that their spouse finds their sibling irritating. A few participants find their spouse intolerant or over sensitive, sometimes with bemusement, as one participant notes: *“[My spouse] left [...] a sudden imagined ailment or something.”* Conversely, when participants talk about siblings-in-law causing discomfort for them, they do not necessarily understand why. A little patronising behaviour is mentioned: *“[my in-law is always] putting me down.”* Although open conflict is rare, a few participants mention that being honest in their opinions when supporting a sibling with marital problems, has far reaching consequences because sensitivities remain even after conflict is resolved. Several participants avoid mentioning the effect of a sibling’s partner on their sibling relationship for fear of causing division. They prefer to hide their thoughts on this matter from their siblings because, as one participant explains: *“we are all getting old, and I would like to remain friends until the end.”*

Although marriage results in a small number of participants’ sibling relationships becoming less relaxed than they would like, downplaying tension in a sibling-in-law relationship seems preferable to risking conflict by being openly critical. Awareness that time together may be drawing to a close, means that there is a shorter window of opportunity within which to resolve conflicts. Participants feel more comfortable attempting to maintain their sibling relationships independently of spouses when tension exists. However, this is difficult in later life when parents are no longer around to mediate, or travelling to see siblings alone is not

as easy. Having narratives from more than one sibling confirms that participants are reluctant to mediate between spouses and siblings. These participants prefer to ignore issues, use excuses to smooth things over, or meet siblings alone. Although these participants are loyal to spouses, they acknowledge that their spouse's behaviour towards their sibling can be unreasonable. They also report that emotional closeness towards their sibling is unchanged but contact is affected. However, these types of tension were rare amongst my participants.

Further insight into the effect of marriage on sibling relationships is provided by participants who divorce, re-marry or became widows/widowers. Participants who experience distance in sibling relationships during married years find that widowhood reverses this, but divorce and re-marriage has variable results, possibly because, as will be discussed in Chapter Nine, these events are experienced earlier in the life-course.

Widowhood, which tends to occur later in the life-course than divorce, leads to significant changes in support, companionship and sociability between siblings in later life. Earlier in this chapter (page 173), I introduced the notion that bereavement, particularly the loss of important family relationships, affects the relationships that remain; that losing peer relationships, particularly friends that participants have grown up with, is hard; and that siblings show empathy towards each other about such losses. This understanding, coupled with a desire not to burden younger family members, makes sibling relationships pertinent providers of the type of assistance needed to cope with bereavement. Widowhood is the most significant form of bereavement experienced by participants in later life, and it intensifies emotional closeness, even between siblings who are already close. For example, following the loss of her spouse, Diana Black realised: *"You've got to love the people that you've already got here, because you don't know what's going to happen."* Furthermore,

her sisters' sharing the experience of widowhood has: "*drawn us closer together, although we were very close anyway.*" Some participants e.g. the Black and the Green siblings, describe a need to physically come together at times of loss. Thus, although participants share understanding with their siblings about the loss of friendships in later life, the loss of a spouse elicits higher levels of support, usually of an emotional nature, but sometimes practically. As will be discussed further in Chapter Eight, support also appears to be phased: Initially, support is responsive and may be mobilised prior to the loss of a spouse for those participants caring for an ill spouse. During this time, siblings primarily help in combatting loneliness, but also carry out practical tasks such as driving and shopping. Following the loss of a spouse, support is emotional, based on empathy, understanding, comforting, listening, and generally being there. Later, support takes the form of companionship and encouragement as siblings help participants to establish new routines, and rebuild a social life, unless the transition is reversed by a sibling re-marrying. Multiple perspectives facilitate a complete version of events and highlight how, in later life, if more than one proximate sibling is widowed, companionship and going out to socialise with siblings becomes permanent, unlike, in earlier life, where re-marrying reverses this effect. However, when siblings are *distant*, there is less support exchange because some forms of support can only be exchanged in person.

The effects, therefore, of *geographical dispersal* are identified by participants as having a significant bearing on their sibling relationships. Although living away from each other may have presented a barrier to maintaining their sibling relationships earlier in life, participants indicate that the main reasons why *geographical distance* is becoming more restrictive to getting together with siblings, than it used to be, include: an inability to travel long distances alone; not having the space to accommodate visiting siblings; and the costs of visiting or travelling. Some of these apply to proximate siblings too, because mobility and cost issues restrict travelling short distances as well.

Doris White is one of several participants, in their eighties, who are no longer confident about travelling alone. Driving long distances is difficult and using public transport challenging. Doris describes feeling unable to “cope” with travelling nowadays. Similarly, her sister Elizabeth admits: *“I don’t do long distance driving anymore, I really hate driving.”* Although Doris and Elizabeth want to see each other, travelling is becoming a barrier to meeting face-to-face. Similarly, Sharon Scarlett who travelled confidently alone around the world throughout her life, is finding long haul flights more daunting and uncomfortable. Another issue is highlighted by the Green sisters who, like the White sisters, have downsized in later life which means that neither sister has the space to accommodate the other anymore. They also struggle to afford the cost of trips to see each other. Anthea explains how their way of managing in the past when Carolyn would sleep *“on a put me up in the lounge”* is impractical now. Both sisters have arthritis and, as Anthea points out, can no longer do that anymore. Similarly, Elizabeth White is unable to sleep on sofa beds now she is in her eighties, and her sister Doris expresses concerns about hosting:

“The thought of entertaining people is just more than I can bear [...] it’s difficult for me to have visitors here [...] my house isn’t geared for it [...] I get in a flap about cooking meals [...] I used to be a terrific hostess, but I can’t cope with it now [...] It’s just being old I think.”

Some of the practical reasons which inhibit getting together are upsetting, particularly if a sibling is in need of support. For instance, Anthea Green explains that after a recent operation, her sister Carolyn could not afford to travel to see her: *“She’s very upset that she hasn’t been able to come up to see me while I’ve been in the state I’ve been in.”* Similarly, Doris White’s siblings invite her to stay and, although she wants to see them, she finds travelling difficult. Doris White, Rebecca Reed, Sharon and Karen Scarlett, Anthea and Carolyn Green, all expressed concerns about the cost of travelling long distances to visit siblings who are not proximate. Difficulties travelling due to ill-health and cost are only

mentioned as a barrier to contact by female participants. Thus, female participants, particularly those in their eighties, or those who are living alone, find travelling, staying with, or hosting siblings difficult and are unable to enjoy as much face-to-face contact with their siblings as they would like.

Moreover, *ill-health* can present a barrier to contact even between proximate siblings, because ill-health or mobility issues are restrictive, irrespective of how close you live. As Rebecca Reed notes if you don't have a car your siblings might as well be hundreds of miles away. Evie Black feels despair that the six-mile bus journey to see her brothers, which used to involve a single bus trip, is complicated nowadays as it involves two changes of buses. The Brown sisters rely on one or two siblings to drive them to see each other, despite living within a few miles of each other. Abigail Bennett is unable to visit her nearby sibling, Mark, due to mobility problems, which means she can no longer walk the short distance to his house. Because Abigail is no longer able to drive either, she is reliant on Mark visiting her. This raises concerns about what would happen if he could no longer do that, concerns that were realised recently when Mark went into hospital. Similarly, although most of the Brown siblings are proximate, some are less mobile.

Thus, there are several reasons why ill-health and/or mobility issues inhibit sibling relationships: firstly, by restricting a participant's ability to travel to see their siblings, or hosting siblings; secondly, due to concerns about becoming a burden; and, thirdly, health problems can lead to anxiety which inhibits the ability to connect with siblings. As discussed earlier, Doris White's fear of becoming a "*nuisance*" or rejected by her siblings seems to be unfounded, because although, Anthony White notes that his relationship with Doris "*tends to be always hinging around her health problems*" he adds, "*when one gets beyond that it can be great fun.*" Doris is one of a number of participants who highlight that being concerned about health needs and worrying about how to cope with travelling or staying

away from home, is creating emotional distance in their sibling relationships in later life. Ironically, these barriers emerge just as available time to spend with siblings is increasing because other commitments are lessening. This raises the issue that many participants would like to see more of their siblings. For instance, the Peacock siblings express a desire to see each other but Edith is waiting for an operation and is unable to travel until it takes place. The greatest desire to spend more time together was expressed by the Scarlett siblings, particularly Jack. Sharon has even considered relocating to be nearer her siblings, but worries about coping with the move. Karen mentions how restrictive geographical distance is, stating: *"I'm sorry they're all over the world. I'm sorry my brother's [abroad]. I mean I'm so sorry. I wish he was around the corner. I'd love to be able to see him more often."* As noted in Chapter Six (page 147), the Peacock sisters have regrets about not considering, when younger, how their decision to emigrate together might affect their family links. However, as discussed below, the means that participants use to keep in touch with siblings at a distance are less costly nowadays and have become more accessible.

The Bennett and Reed siblings show that *moving nearer* to siblings in later life leads to increased contact and closeness, and provides greater opportunity for socialising and providing support. Abigail Bennett mentions resisting her daughter's suggestion that she move to live with her, because it would mean a move away from her brother Mark. As she notes, her life *"is here"* so, for her, ageing in place is preferable, as support from her brother is sufficient to enable Abigail to continue to live independently. It is noticeable that siblings who are proximate and mobile, tend to have regular routines based on gathering to share meals, shopping together, or popping around for a cup of tea and a chat. However, even they are keen to see more of each other, as Eric Brown notes: *"Sometimes I wish we got a bit together a bit more as a group like last week."* Similarly, Denise Black feels: *"You can't always invite the whole family, but it doesn't mean to say that you don't want to, and you don't consider the whole family."*

Many participants described the *technological advances*, which have taken place over their life-times, that allow them to connect with siblings in new and better ways in later life. For example, Anthea and Carolyn Green's means of keeping in touch has evolved and improved over the forty years they have lived in different parts of the country. Telephoning each other is not the expensive and inaccessible process it used to be. Carolyn and Anthea have a regular time when they speak to each other on the phone. Telephone calls to siblings who live abroad are now affordable and of better quality. For instance, Edith and Harriet Peacock phone their brother, Len, from abroad free of charge at weekends, which has facilitated an increase in contact between them, and drawn them closer, as Harriet notes:

"Because we've been in contact more you know, and I speak to him a lot more and yes, I can just tell we're closer now, than that we were perhaps fifteen years ago or something."

Text messaging and e-mails are used by most participants because they can be instantaneous and, if someone is attending a doctor's or hospital appointment for instance, are less intrusive. Anthea Green explains: *"If you've got an appointment at the doctors or something there'll always be a text 'thinking about you today Anthea, hope it goes well.'"* Even siblings who see each other regularly use text messaging to supplement meeting in person. The Peacock sisters mention how useful this is when weather conditions inhibit meeting in person as Harriet notes:

"In the winter time everything changes here because we've got snow, right. It's started snowing, and it's very cold, and so we phone each other a lot, or text each other."

Although the Black family see each other, or phone each other often, text messaging is also important to them. Carl, who was ill recently, recalls:

“They insisted that I learned to text, so I could contact them all quickly with any information [...] the family were obviously very, very, very, very close at that point, constantly texting and phoning to see how I was.”

As Carl’s brother Frank adds, sending a text message is an instant way of showing support, which he appreciated during his recent course of treatment: *“It was nice that they were texting the wife to see how I was going on, asking her how she was too.”* Participants are keen to embrace new means of keeping in contact. Gareth Silver indicates how, because he and Richard live a considerable distance apart, *“e-mail and obviously Facebook help, and text...”*. So, social media, mobile phones and Skype have a role to play in connecting siblings more. Although participants are keen to embrace these new means of connecting, which are valuable for keeping up-to-date with what is happening in their siblings’ lives, they supplement face-to-face contact, rather than substitute getting together. Thus, in later life, geographical distance presents more of a barrier to face-to-face contact for some participants than they considered it might when they decided to move away earlier in life.

7.4 Conclusion

The majority of participants describe their sibling relationships as important based on their dual role as an important family relationship and friendship. That Participants’ sibling relationships are taking on increased meaning in later life is attributed, rather paradoxically, to both their stability and their adaptability. Becoming more tolerant and accepting of differences; appreciating siblings more as a result of mellowing; and deciding to be kinder are reasons for sibling relationships increasing in importance in later life, which seem to be linked to drawing closer to siblings emotionally. Participants describe age gaps diminishing in significances as they get older, enabling common ground to be emphasised. However, losing key relationships evokes a fear of sibling loss, which draws siblings closer.

In later life, participants' sibling relationships are mediated by a number of circumstances, which have different effects. First, retirement increases the time available to spend with siblings, shifting focus away from career ambitions and onto their sibling relationships. Second, some participants' caring duties restrict the amount of time that they have to spend with their siblings, although some siblings are supportive at such times. Third, marriage mediates sibling relationships: some sibling groups absorb sibling-in-laws into the sibling group and treat them as siblings; some experience sibling relationships as relationships between couples, rarely spending time alone with married siblings; and others describe how tension in their sibling-in-law relationship alters contact patterns, but not emotional closeness. Whether marriage facilitates or restricts sibling relationships seems to be influenced by the relative compatibilities of each couples' family culture. However, following widowhood, sibling support and companionship is important, and seems to be enduring, often returning the relationship to just being siblings, rather than couples, or family units.

Participants reveal that in later life, geographical proximity can present a greater barrier to seeing and supporting siblings in person than it did earlier in life, because practical issues restrict participants' abilities to travel to see, or to host, their siblings. These include health and mobility problems, financial problems and not being able to host siblings since downsizing living accommodation. However, some of these problems elicit support from siblings. Participants who have moved nearer to a sibling in later life demonstrate that this facilitates greater support exchange, enabling participants to continue to live independently. This chapter has focused on the importance of sibling relationships as family relationship and friendships in later life. However, sibling relationships are also important for the companionship they provide and the range of supportive behaviours they engage in, as will be discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Eight: Siblings as companions and supporters in later life

8.0 Introduction

In this Chapter I draw attention to the interrelated roles of companionship and support which participants highlight as significant features of sibling relationships in later life (research question one). In doing so, I continue to explore the benefits that participants associate with their sibling relationships and further address the idea that because sibling relationships continue to be re-negotiated in response to need (research question three), siblings are valuable providers of a range of support. I also highlight how the reciprocal nature of socio-emotional and practical support contributes to participants' willingness to exchange support with their siblings. Next, I discuss the ways in which participants describe their siblings as companions and how they connect with them. I also consider whether some differences in contact patterns are due to gender effects (research question three)' and whether sisters are more supportive than brothers. Finally, I highlight participants' concerns about the future of their sibling relationships.

8.1 Siblings as providers of companionship and social support

Participants highlight that social and emotional support provide a framework within which other supportive functions of sibling relationships, such as reminiscing, every day talk, and sharing on a range of levels, exist. Thus, in later life, as in childhood, siblings function as important companions who exchange a range of supportive behaviours. Moreover, these behaviours are perceived by many participants as such a normative function of sibling relationships that they are often not highlighted as part of their routines. This type of socio-emotional support and companionship is such an important feature of some sibling relationships that, for instance, members of the Brown and Black families promote the message to younger members. As Frank explains: *"We all remain friends, we never fall out, we're all close."* This type of support is such an integral part of the Brown and the Black

siblings' family culture that they demonstrate that they value each other to their own families by always considering their siblings. A recurring theme arising from participants' narratives is that sibling relationships play an important social role in later life, in numerous ways. Several sibling groups go on holiday together, and the majority have routines which revolve around the Christmas period. Participants enjoy social and cultural activities with their siblings such as going to the theatre, visiting art galleries, cooking meals for each other, going out for meals together, shopping, walking, and doing or watching sport.

One reason why participants identify their siblings as important companions in later life is that the changing circumstances introduced in Chapter Seven (e.g. retirement; being less involved with younger family members; or the loss of key relationships) provide opportunity to spend time with siblings. In addition, widowed siblings are in the position of gathering as *"just siblings"* rather than couples or family units. Therefore, widowed participants from the Bennett, the Black and the Brown sibling groups experience sibling relationships in a way that Abigail Bennett terms: *"akin to how it was as children."* This can extend to married participants too, such as Eric Brown whose wife is perceived as part of the sibling group and who lives near to his widowed siblings. Thus, Eric Brown is an example of a younger married participant whose siblings are important social companions. As Eric sums up, *"we can have fun together, as much as we can grieve together."* In terms of the enjoyment that sibling relationships provide currently, some participants increasingly enjoy reminiscing with their siblings because, as members of the Black and the Brown sibling groups highlight, it can be advantageous to reminisce together as a complete sibling group. Diana Black explains this is because it *"triggers more memories"* and enhances the recall of past memories in a way that cannot be replicated when alone. Diana adds that sorting through *"bags and bags of old photographs"* also provides additional enjoyment, while Liz Brown likewise attributes increased feelings of emotional closeness to her siblings to reminiscing:

“We reminisce quite a lot you know, and when you’re talking things suddenly come back to you [...] I think that’s a reason you get, when you’re older, you get closer.”

Although some participants view reminiscing as a light-hearted activity which enhances recall and provides enjoyment when conducted with siblings who share memories, particularly of parents, some participants believe that reminiscing fulfils other functions and is not always an enjoyable process for all involved. In Chapter Seven (page 169) I introduced the notion that reminiscing can be conducted in a purposeful way. For Harriet and Edith Peacock who still struggle to come to terms with the effect that emigrating had on their family links, reminiscing over earlier memories is about being open about the sadness and regret which they feel and can only share with each other, as Harriet notes:

“We sort of look back on things quite a bit, me and Edith sort of would talk about being here, and how sometimes we wish we’d have gone back home. We do talk about that quite often.”

The Scarlett siblings also indicate that reminiscence is sometimes cathartic. As they have been dispersed for most of their lives (see Chapter Six, page 149) they only meet as a sibling group sporadically when they reminisce intensely about their difficult past, because they need not only to recall, but to understand what Sharon terms their *“weird history”*, and Jack their *“rather dysfunctional”* upbringing. In common with the White siblings, the Scarlett siblings inherited correspondence which is helping them to make sense of past events and their consequences. This type of reminiscing is referred to by Anita White as *“reminiscing with a purpose”* because it is about reminiscing in an analytical way in order to gain meaning. Thus, participants’ accounts reveal that reminiscing takes several forms, ranging from spontaneous, light-hearted discussions of shared experiences, to purposeful reminiscing aimed at questioning why things happened in order to make sense of them. However, it is also important to note that some participants do not mention reminiscing as

a topic of conversation, as they tend to discuss everyday events or something commonly described as talking about *“nothing in particular.”* As Eric Brown succinctly puts it: *“We can talk about anything. No subject really is taboo.”* Felicity Brown explains that because their sibling group meet regularly and do things together, their conversations are wide ranging:

“On a Thursday afternoon we have a cup of tea and a cake and err we’re always on about summat wot’s happened, you know, either on holiday or what we were [up to] when we were kids [...] You might be talking about one thing and then something else just triggers a memory, and you’re on about something else, you know.”

Although reminiscing is important, participants value siblings as soul mates who they talk to about a range of topics such as: everyday concerns and gossip; other family members; shared interests; and social activities they engage in, or are planning. Several participants, particularly female participants tended to focus on reporting conversations during their narrative rather than focusing solely on actions or events. This highlights that everyday talk is an important aspect of sibling relationships. Diana Brown’s narrative is fairly typical of this. She recounts a conversation between her sisters Liz and Charlotte, that Charlotte relayed to her:

“[Liz] rang Charlotte and [Charlotte] said, coz [Liz] said had we done- had we been the Gold centre? That was it, and had we been weighed? ‘Coz apparently at this Gold centre you can be weighed, and they tell you what your weight is worth in gold. [Liz’s] worth about eight million something, she said. [Charlotte] said “no we never got the chance” [Liz] said “When you come down again we’ll go.””

Abigail and Mark Bennett also highlight conversation as an important feature of their sibling relationship and they talk a lot about music and theatre, their life-long shared interests and, as Mark notes, their discussions are honest and meaningful:

“The nice thing is we have some quite deep conversations as well, because neither of us pull any punches. I don’t know whether she’s told you, Abigail’s quite a religious person, you know. She is a practising Catholic [...] and I’m a Quaker and uhm, but there is no conflict there I can assure you. I wouldn’t mind if she was a Buddhist or what to be honest, but we have some interesting conversations.”

Clearly, the advantage of companionship built on conversation is that it can be maintained at a distance, as Richard Silver articulates: *“I enjoy talking to him on the phone and we’ve got a lot of things in common that we laugh about on the phone which is great.”* Similarly, the Green sisters exchange news over the telephone, as Carolyn explains: *“She does ring and tells me all about what she’s done all through the week, all her friends, and you know.”*

Although participants gain pleasure from recalling previously forgotten moments with their siblings, highlighting reminiscence as *the* major function of sibling relationships in later life, detracts from social exchange which participants value but consider to be mundane. Evie Black’s concern that their ordinary shared lives might appear unexciting is typical:

“I did worry what you’d think, well, because there’s nothing like spectacular [I] can tell you that happened or anything like that, you know [...] there isn’t one of the brothers or sisters that we’ve not been speaking to or anything.”

As Eric Brown also expresses, accounts of meeting for “dinner” and “a natter” to “talk about anything” can sound uneventful. Similarly, Richard Silver mentions that his conversations with Gareth often involve having a “chit chat” about “nothing in particular” as well as their more intense debates. An advantage of using individual interviews to capture the interactions of members of sibling groups, is that it enables a rounded picture of their ordinary “non-spectacular” interactions to be built up.

Although, as noted in Chapter Two (page 20), the literature suggests that women maintain more contact with their siblings, the reasons that participants' contact with their siblings has increased in later life, such as having more time and appreciating them more, apply equally to participants of either sex. Currently, age differences also seem to be influential for two reasons. First, youngest siblings such as Alison Black and Richard Silver are still busy with careers and family life so, for them, lack of time presents a barrier to contact irrespective of gender. Second, as discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 183-185), new barriers to face-to-face contact, namely those which affect individuals' ability to travel or host are arising for some of the oldest siblings. However, there appears to be a gender bias in the latter case because affordability and mobility issues are only raised as barriers to travelling/hosting by female participants. However, it should also be noted that there are more female than male participants in their eighties, widowed, living alone, and who are not able to drive.

In terms of current contact routines, male participants have regular contact routines with nearby sisters. As no male participants live near to participating brothers, comparison is not possible. However, Frank Black and Eric Brown are in regular contact with their non-participating nearby brothers. Overall, the majority of male participants are in regular contact with distant brothers and sisters, with the exceptions of Henry Scarlett and Liam Coal who, as noted in Chapter Six, have always been more independent of their siblings.

The two brother-only pairs emphasise that maintaining contact is important to them. The Grey brothers both use the phrase "*I make a point of seeing him*", and feel as if, as Adrian expresses it, "*something is missing*" if they are out of contact for more than a few weeks nowadays. Overall, they are in contact enough to feel as if, in Adrian's words, they are: "*still together*." Gareth and Richard Silver also acknowledge that living far apart inevitably reduces contact, although Gareth notes that they meet as "*frequently as we can manage*" and use phone calls and e-mails to supplement face-to-face contact. Although work

commitments are a barrier for Richard, Gareth views distance as less of a barrier since he retired because he has the time and means to visit Richard. The sister-only pair, the Green sisters, are in frequent contact, which is not often face-to-face because they find travelling to stay/hosting difficult due to a combination of costs and practicalities. Although the Green sisters' contact routine is regular, they are less able to meet in person or take advantage of opportunistic meetings than both of the brother-only pairs.

Male participants who only have sisters, such as Anthony White and Len Peacock, have regular contact routines with their sisters. Although currently, Len Peacock's sisters initiate the phone call as it is free for them now, earlier in life Len used to go to their mother's house so that he and his mother could call Edith and Harriet together. Moreover, Len flies out to see his sisters who have not returned to England since their mother died. The White siblings' contact patterns are based on geographical proximity, not gender. Anthony White has more regular face-to-face contact with his most proximate sister, Elizabeth, since she moved nearer to him and, as discussed in Chapter Seven (page 183), Doris, who lives the furthest away, is experiencing barriers to contacting her siblings irrespective of their gender.

The Black and Brown families are mixed-sex sibling groups who, due to their close geographical proximity, maintain traditional kin-keeping routines: The Black siblings gather at their former parental home; and the Brown siblings connect through Charlotte Brown who keeps an *"open house"* like her mother and her grandmother before her having, *"inherited me mum's gene."* Members of the Brown sibling group who are unable to make regular family gatherings connect to the others via Charlotte, Diana and Eric. Similarly, the Black family continue their routine of Saturday gatherings established by their mother. Carl poignantly recounts: *"When [mum] knew she was dying [she] asked us to keep together and see each other."* Alison reveals that their former family home is a focal point:

“Two brothers who have never been married [...] are still, like, in the family home and that’s where we all meet up [...] so that’s a stable point [...] We have all got that one place where we do all meet up.”

The Black siblings also share news of each other between them, ensuring that those who are not able to make every family gathering remain connected, as Alison explains:

“Without it being a written code, we just know that if somebody rings up, then we say “okay” and it does go through the grapevine you know. “We’ll tell so and so, and you ring so and so” [...] It’s never a written order or a written rule, but we do all keep in touch that way.”

In addition to moves nearer to each other, contact between some participants and their siblings increased when one or more siblings lost their spouse. For example, five of the Brown siblings are in contact more since becoming widows. Similarly, David Reed is in contact more with his siblings since his wife died. David has a fixed weekly routine with Rebecca and travels abroad to see Ralph every year, something that he never did during his married years. Rebecca receives news of Ralph via David, and David’s new role, of connecting his siblings, represents a change in their relationships following his transition into widowerhood. For most sibling groups, traditional female kin-keeping roles, part of their family traditions a generation before, are fading. They seem less relevant in smaller dispersed families, who have more and newer means of connecting now (see Chapter Seven, page 186).

Participants’ accounts confirm that contact routines are complex, and that asking about contact frequency between specific siblings would not have revealed how members of sibling groups interconnect, and how linked their lives are. Multiple accounts reveal that most participants are interested in, and up-to-date with, what is happening in their siblings’

lives. Irrespective of how connected participants and their siblings are routinely, contact between brothers and sisters increases at what Eric Brown terms “*times of difficulty*” and “*times of joy*.” This relates to a sibling’s role as an important family member, expected to fulfil certain family obligations and attend family events, as well as an important supporter and friend. A recent example of increased contact in response to need is provided by Eric himself who recalls how, when one of his sisters was recently widowed, the whole sibling group came together “*nearly every day for about two to three weeks*.” Furthermore, contact, emotional closeness, companionship and support are interrelated, with companionship and support particularly intertwined. Denise Black expresses how a strong sense of belonging - or “*that pull*” - combines with a “*need*” to be together as siblings, further illustrating the dual role that brothers and sisters fulfil:

“There are certain times when there’s that pull, that you just need, and it’s nice to know that you’ve got a sister that’s there for you, or a brother that’s there for you.”

Currently, sibling relationships fulfil a range of supportive roles, which include friend, companion, protector, helper, someone to reminisce with or to alleviate loneliness.

8.2 The nature of support exchange

As well as highlighting the many forms that sibling support takes, participants also reveal how reciprocal support is, either as an ongoing exchange or as recompense for past support. Abigail Bennett, who uses the term “*reciprocal*” herself when she explains how support between her and Mark intensified after his wife died, provides a typical account of the give and take in sibling relationships:

“We were very close and supportive. Well he was supportive to me after my husband died [...] It’s been reciprocal because we’ve supported each other [...] I’ve done lots of things for him and he for me.”

Nowadays, the younger Brown siblings mention that the support they provide to their older siblings is about reciprocation, which does not need to be like-for-like. Charlotte, for instance, describes *“doing the looking after”* because Felicity, who always looked after her, needs help now she is *“not good on her legs.”* Charlotte feels *“I must be paying her back for all the caring.”* Eric Brown describes younger siblings reciprocating for older siblings’ earlier care as a role reversal, noting, *“I can still be mothered a bit, but I also take on the other role where I become their shoulder to lean on.”* Eric, who takes pleasure in reciprocating, describes gaining satisfaction from helping his sisters.

Participants and their siblings also provide a wide range of support over the life-course which Evie Black sums up when she says: *“all through life we’ve looked after one another.”* Adrian Grey talks about the reciprocal nature of support feeling that if Robert ever needs his help in the future, he would be *“utterly, utterly, amazed if I wasn’t [supportive towards Robert], because my wife, you know, who died had a real soft spot for Robert.”* Adrian also wonders if Robert is supportive of him because he and his first wife supported Robert during his single years: *“In fact when Robert was going through difficulties forty years ago, you know, we were able to help him a bit, and I suppose he remembered.”* Related to this, most participants, even those who have not yet needed to call upon sibling support, are confident they could if needed. As will be considered later in this chapter (pages 215-216), this provides them with a sense of security.

The importance of sibling relationships during difficult times, is a theme which commonly emerges from both male and female participants’ narratives. A sibling is of primary significance, for instance, during the transition to widowhood, and siblings are identified as advisors or confidants by the Bennett, the Black, the Brown, the Green, and the Silver siblings, because of high levels of trust between them. As well as being sources of advice,

siblings take on supportive roles during times of need. Adrian Grey began his narrative by recalling events that illustrate the importance of his relationship with his brother Robert. Because these events highlight support as a major function of his sibling relationship, Adrian did not want their significance to be diluted during a chronological account of their relationship. Reflecting back, Adrian views his brother's support as "*delightful*" and of lasting significance. He also notes:

"Some people won't have had that type of experience and they may have known siblings in a more distant way, but because those, you know, those related events, you know, that became extremely important."

It is evident that Adrian is extremely grateful to his brother and, for him, these episodes of support have become foregrounded. He notes they are: "*obviously the most important thing, that I can now remember, about our relationship.*" Other participants are experiencing similar needs now, which their siblings are responding to. Although some participants describe supportive behaviour between them and their siblings arising in later life, particularly in relation to ill-health or the loss of a spouse, some describe supportive behaviour as embedded within their sibling relationships, and others describe episodic support over the life-course, foregrounded under certain circumstances.

In terms of the nature of support in later life, it takes many forms both practically and emotionally, some of which are acknowledged/recognised more by some participants than others. For instance, unless practical support presents as a heightened response to a temporary need, it can be perceived as such a routine function of sibling relationships that it is not always perceived as support. For example, Diana Brown feels that practical support only flows from Charlotte to her, despite mentioning driving Charlotte to doctors' appointments, to visit their other sisters, and to the shops. Although participants indicate that sibling support is primarily emotional in nature, giving lifts, helping with DIY, shopping

or cooking meals, are types of routine help that participants overlooked when asked whether they provided any support to their siblings. Interestingly, Rebecca Reed wonders whether her brother David considers cooking her a meal once a week, which she views as supportive, as merely *“giving me my tea.”*

Practical help is recognisable as support when it arises in response to temporary needs or a crisis such as help with moving house; intensive/emergency DIY/home maintenance tasks; lifts that are urgent e.g. driving to hospital; technical help in fixing things e.g. with computers or cars; or financial assistance. Rebecca Reed again provides several examples of both of her brothers assisting her practically during difficult times. For example, David helped her when she needed to re-establish herself when he worked on her new home:

“He came here every single day [...] he knocked a wall out at err in the kitchen err he laboured for the builders, and he shouldn’t have done. If he hadn’t have been here, it would have been chaos [...] he kind of supervised people [...] he came every day [...] for about ten weeks. He fitted the bathroom for me, took the other out [...] He was very supportive, coz he can do practical things.”

Rebecca also recounts how Ralph recently *“offered me my plane fare to go and spend Christmas with them [...] really touched me [...] I just thought that was very, very kind.”* Similarly, Sharon Scarlett mentions how her brother, Jack, provides financial assistance, a form of support that can occur between distant siblings:

“If I can’t afford the fare to [fly out and visit] he’ll pay it and that kind of thing. He’s generous now, you know. Yeh. He’s been a good elder brother.”

Thus, routine practical support is less likely to be perceived as support than crisis-driven practical help and, as will be discussed later, practical support exchange is influenced by gender (pages 211-214). Participants also highlighted that practical help of a reciprocal nature occurs when siblings are organising celebratory events, outings, holidays and that shopping, cooking and washing up together, help to promote a sense of still being in it together, all “mucking in” as they did when they lived at home together.

By contrast, emotional support is highlighted more, and likely to still be considered a form of support even when taking place every day or merely perceived to be available. Furthermore, emotional support can be exchanged at a distance, whereas practical support exchange can often only be accomplished between siblings who are able to meet in person. That distant siblings can still provide companionship and alleviate loneliness is evident, for instance, in Len Peacock’s account:

“[They are always] at the end of the phone, sort of thing [...] Sometimes I get a bit fed up with me own company and I ring them up just for a gossip really, and I think they’ve felt the same.”

Due to the geographical distance between Len and his sisters, support between them and Len is limited to emotional support, whereas Edith and Harriet who are proximate to each other are able to exchange a wider range of support, as Harriet notes: *“Edith and I do just support each other all the time. We always try to help each other with things, you know, that are bothering us.”*

In reality, practical and emotional support are often combined, particularly in response to a crisis. Further consideration is given next to the nature of support elicited in response to some of the main circumstances which lead to increased support exchange between participants and their siblings.

8.3 Life-course events which elicit sibling support

Although sibling relationships provide a range of emotional and practical support under varied circumstances in later life, health issues and/or the death of a spouse are highlighted by participants as being particularly salient. As they get older, participants increasingly face the issue of their own ill-health. Moreover, many live with chronic conditions as Carl Black illustrates when he refers to the health problems he and his siblings are experiencing:

“We’ve all had different problems, as we’ve got older. I mean with Jonathon, and then me with that scare. I’ve had two replacement knees, and they were very concerned obviously at that time [...] Frank’s got Leukaemia, Jonathon had a stroke, Evie’s got diabetes.”

Some health conditions, such as cancer, lead to sudden changes in health status, cause uncertainty about the future, and mobilise emotional support. Other conditions such as osteoarthritis, or hearing loss, result in ongoing, gradual changes in health or mobility, which affect participants’ ability to socialise. In the latter circumstances, companionship, understanding and practical support and/or adjustments are important, whereas the former evokes a strong emotional response and is primarily about comfort and reassurance. Support ranges in frequency from daily support as part of a routine, to episodic support, for instance, in response to a crisis. The mode of support includes support provided in person, which can be practical, emotional, or social, and distant support via phone, e-mail or text message, for example, which is comforting or advisory.

In later life, sibling group members who exchange the most support due to illness are those who are proximate. This applies particularly to participants who are experiencing chronic long-term illnesses. For example, Abigail Bennett, whose restricted mobility inhibits her social life and ability to do every day activities, benefits from companionship, emotional support, and practical support on a daily basis from her nearby brother Mark. Abigail enjoys

conversing with Mark, feels protected by him, and receives practical support because he runs errands and does her shopping. Abigail explains how support is facilitated by their close proximity:

“We’ve seen each other every day virtually, and I know he’s there for me and I’m there for him [...] which is wonderful, because although my family are very close, well, they’re not on the doorstep as Mark is.”

Abigail’s view of Mark nowadays as: *“My supporting brother, and friend, and helper”* further highlights the theme that siblings play a dual role. Experiencing health issues himself, and having been his late wife’s main carer, means Mark is empathetic about the restrictions Abigail’s health issues impose on her, as he notes that: *“Like a lot of old people who’ve had a lot of ill health, and she has that a lot, she tends to medicalise her life quite a bit, which I fully understand.”*

The Bennett siblings’ relationship is also founded on reciprocal support exchange. Abigail confirms how empathetic Mark is, recalling how he was affected *“very badly”* by her physical pain recently, made worse because he felt *“there was nothing he could do to help me.”* Abigail felt similarly helpless during Mark’s recent hospital stay, and her feelings are still influenced by her earlier role in his life because she perceives herself as the caring older sister. Furthermore, past care and support from Abigail to Mark, influences Mark’s view and acceptance of his current role, which is both a responsibility and *“the way it should be.”* Mark feels that helping Abigail now, reciprocates the care she provided to him earlier in life as well as the concern and companionship she provides now that they both live alone. Mark’s current *“watching function”* is an important part of his daily routine of *“checking up on her to see what she’s like.”* Eric and Charlotte Brown, and Anita and Anthony White, also describe a role reversal as they re-negotiate their sibling relationships out of increased concern for their older siblings, who are experiencing health problems.

Like the Bennett siblings, the Brown and the Black siblings are mainly proximate to each other, and they also highlight empathy and practical support in response to health problems. However, being larger sibling groups, many siblings are involved in support exchanges, due to high levels of interdependency. Although each sibling mentions being able to call on any of their siblings for support, in reality it depends on the nature of support required, and relative proximity or mobility. For example, Diana Brown acts as a link between the Brown siblings and their eldest brother, Sydney, who is not participating in this study because he cannot speak. Diana lives near to him, is able to drive, has remained in closer contact and has learnt to lip read, all of which cement her role as the sibling who links Sydney to the others. However, although Diana also supports her sisters by driving them to see each other, to the shops, or for doctors' appointments, it is Eric Brown, perceived as the dependable younger brother, who is more likely to be called upon in a crisis. The reason that Eric is chosen is because his older sisters try to avoid burdening each other too much, as they have health problems of their own.

The Black siblings also show high levels of interdependency and tend to provide support collectively, either simultaneously or by taking it in turns to be there. They attribute their need to be together during difficult times to being brought up to share emotions and provide mutual comfort. Frank Black, who underwent chemotherapy treatment recently, describes getting comfort from the mere presence of his siblings even when sat together in silence. As discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 163-164), the Black siblings are adept at recognising changing needs and adapting to health problems arising with age.

The White siblings demonstrate how more than one sibling can share concerns over their other siblings' health. Anita notes how she and Anthony: *"talk a lot about our older sisters, which is a kind of concern for them."* Although their sister Doris has adult children, her

siblings are well placed to understand her needs. Anthony, for instance, believes that Doris needs nearby “*sheltered accommodation*” in order to age in place, rather than moving to be nearer to an adult child, because “[it] would be the death of Doris to move from a sort of [rural] old industrial village [...] into Inner London.” Siblings are well placed to understand the importance of ageing in place and of preserving each other’s independence, as Abigail and Mark Bennett’s relationship also testifies to.

In contrast to chronic illness, which creates ongoing concern and adaptation, response to acute illness or a crisis is episodic and mobilised rapidly. Carl Black, for example, recalls his siblings’ quick response when he was mis-diagnosed with terminal cancer. Having lost one sibling to cancer already, the Black siblings gave Carl and his wife, and each other, emotional support in the form of comfort. Although Carl’s condition turned out to be benign, this experience illustrates how protective and responsive siblings can be. Carl recalls: “*The family were obviously very, very, very, very, close at that point uhm constantly texting and phoning to see how I was.*” The Black siblings are particularly supportive over illness, because their past history enhances their understanding about the reality of sibling loss.

Jack Scarlett’s experience highlights how support can be received at a distance in response to a crisis. Jack, who is in his eighties, provides end-of-life care for his wife. His siblings share concerns about the toll that the intense nature of these caring duties have on Jack’s wellbeing. Because none of his siblings are proximate to him (see Chapter Six) they feel empathy and also a degree of helplessness. For instance, Sharon expresses a desire to offer practical support and indicates that only being able to “*exchange when I could with him word-wise*” makes her feel inadequate. However, Jack indicates that emotional support from his siblings is helpful, because during a recent crisis Jack reached out to his younger sister, Karen, as he explains:

“I’ve had bang, bang, bang, hit me like that [...] there was [my] sickness and [the carer’s] departure, and then almost immediately the doctor said my wife was going to die within a few days.”

Jack relates how, in the space of a couple of weeks, *“four wrecking balls hit me”*, namely: his wife’s misdiagnosis; his illness; the carer leaving; and the turmoil created by new carers re-organising the house. Despite living in different countries, Karen provided emotional support via e-mail and Jack feels she metaphorically *“held my hand”* through an incredibly difficult time. Although Jack’s adult children live nearby, they have their own emotions to deal with as they are coming to terms with the knowledge that their mother is dying. Thus, Jack and Karen’s accounts show how empathy, understanding and comfort, are important aspects of sibling relationships, because siblings can listen and advise in a non-judgemental and sensitive way.

Similarly, Belinda Black’s siblings admit to taking it in turns to support her emotionally and to alleviate the loneliness which caring for an ill spouse brings. Evie explains that they are more available than her working adult children and grandchildren, and Evie illustrates how a sibling’s role can be about engaging the carer in enjoyable activities, while adult children provide respite care. Evie describes how gratifying it is to encourage Belinda to go out, recounting with pleasure: *“I’ve not heard Belinda laugh so much in a long time, we had a real good time.”*

In Chapter Seven (pages 172-173), I highlighted that losing key relationships, particularly family relationships, enhances the importance of remaining relationships. The longevity of sibling relationships promotes high levels of empathy and support at such times, and sibling support in relation to widowhood in later life appears particularly enduring and responsive as adjustments to widowhood occur. A common thread running through participants’

narratives is that sibling support is often mobilised prior to the loss of a spouse in response to an older adult becoming a carer for their spouse. Moreover, siblings are often well placed to provide support because experiencing the same transition themselves enhances understanding. Adult children are considered to be supportive over practical tasks such as organising the funeral, or informing the authorities of their parent's death but, as Charlotte explains, adult children are grieving themselves: *"Although my kids were absolutely supportive, they'd got their own [grief], because he was their dad [...] they were there, but they were finding it difficult as well."*

Thus, Charlotte Brown describes why, when her husband died, emotional support from her siblings was preferable to support from adult children: *"It was just having that steady, oldish, same, you know, to talk to, get it all out, without making it worse for the kids."* Charlotte's view that empathy and understanding received from siblings when a spouse dies is valued because of the depth of confiding possible with a sibling, is fairly typical. Furthermore, participants highlight that siblings provide comfort and emotional support for longer than adult children following widowhood, and also emphasise that they want their adult children to get on with their own lives. A common remark made by participants about the transition into widowhood, is that they could not cope without their sibling's loving support. For example, Anthea Green recounts her sister's role on the night that her husband died, noting she was *"very, very supportive to me [...] just by being there really and uhm you know listening, listening to me."* Anthea's description of support immediately after the loss of a spouse or partner, highlights that support from siblings is primarily about comfort, whereas practical support is perceived to be the domain of adult children.

Siblings are supportive in the longer term too. As Charlotte Brown explains, when widowhood follows a period of caring for an ill spouse, siblings can help a widow/widower to rebuild their social life. Charlotte recounts how caring becomes restrictive, and once caring duties dissolve, the former carer can be quite isolated:

“You don’t realise how much of your life, you’re giving up, until you lose them and then you suddenly think “well I stopped doing that, I stopped doing that, I stopped doing that, I stopped doing that, I stopped work, I stopped this, I stopped that”, and it’s quite difficult to get back in to [everything].”

Charlotte’s siblings were instrumental in helping her re-establish a social life, an experience shared by other widowed participants. Because five of the six Brown sisters are widowed, their narratives highlight how support exchange following widowhood can be reciprocal and responsive. The multiple narratives of the widowed Brown sisters reveal that support towards each other began prior to widowhood and continued to evolve as, one by one, more sisters transitioned into widowhood. Furthermore, because all of their husbands died following a period of illness, each sister transitioned from carer to widow and support exchange adapted in response to this change. Initially, support of a social nature was received by Felicity Brown who was caring for her husband, from her sister Olive, who was more available than the other siblings (see page 174). As Felicity’s husband’s illness progressed other sisters began to provide social support, whilst her adult children provided respite. Then, once Diana’s long-term partner died, and Felicity’s husband began to go into formal respite care, Felicity, Diana and Olive went on holidays together. Charlotte joined them once widowed herself. Felicity explains how the common experience of widowhood bound the sisters’ already close relationships more tightly: *“we’ve always been close [...] we’ve always thought a lot of one another [but] with us being on our own we seem to cling.”*

What began as an alliance between four widowed sisters extended recently when Liz, who lives away, became a widow too. All of the Brown siblings’ narratives portray a sense of reconnection with Liz through loss, as Diana explains: *“[Liz] seemed as though she’d been out of the family and she wanted to get back into the fold”*, adding that she and her widowed sisters visited Liz recently, and will continue to do so. Furthermore, the Brown siblings are

concerned about their remaining married sister who is a carer to her husband, who is in his nineties. Within the Brown family, support exchange is not confined to exchange between widowed siblings. Eric too is important and Diana's view of Eric as *"the stalwart of the family"* is representative, as is her confidence that *"if you needed him, he'd be there."* In fact, Charlotte uses an identical phrase when she describes support from Eric: *"our Eric said 'I'll be there.' He's like that with all of us..."* Charlotte also gave a detailed account of support given to her by Eric in the period preceding her husband's death, which also illustrates her desire not to burden her sisters:

"[Eric] was there waiting with me [at the hospital], so that I didn't have to [go alone]. I couldn't have phoned the girls, the girls wouldn't have [coped] [...] we were told [my husband] was [dying], and without our Eric there..."

As will be discussed in Chapter Nine (page 212), Eric's supportive nature is lifelong and attributed to the love and care he received earlier in life.

By contrast, the Reed siblings' experience highlights how siblings who were not emotionally close earlier in life, come together when one of their spouses dies. Rebecca and Ralph Reed are clear that their roles, as siblings, when David's wife died, were about being there to make sure David was alright, rather than undertaking practical tasks such as funeral arrangements. Furthermore, once David's wife died, he became closer to his siblings, and now that David and Rebecca are geographically close, what began as a supportive response has become about companionship. As a result of doing more together, David and Rebecca explain that they feel closer *"than we've ever been."* Other participants' accounts support the finding that sibling support following widow/ widowerhood alters from being there initially, to helping them regain a social life.

Support between the Bennett, the Brown and members of the Black, the Peacock and the Reed sibling groups, is facilitated by close proximity, making it easier for support to become companionship. For others, geographical distance can be inhibiting. For example, Sharon Scarlett found it necessary to travel back to England in search of emotional support from her siblings when her husband died, and Edith Peacock finds it easier to exchange support with her nearby sister than her geographically distant brother. However, although geographical proximity facilitates support, and siblings are preferred sources of emotional support following widowhood, their ability to provide adequate support depends on their circumstances at the time, as the Bennett siblings' experience illustrates. Although Abigail and Mark Bennett's current supportive relationship is facilitated by close proximity; living alone; shared interests; and adult children living away, Abigail notes that when she was first widowed: *"Unfortunately Mark's wife had dementia and so he had a very busy time with her"* and *"Mark was there for me, as much as he could be."* This suggests that although she needed support, she appreciated that Mark did what he could at the time. After Mark's wife died, Abigail notes *"we became very, very close again because we were both on our own."* Thus, Abigail's narrative indicates that if a sibling is unable to support as much as hoped, tension does not arise if the reasons are understood.

Support in response to widowhood appears then to be phased. Initially, siblings respond to participants caring for an ill spouse and help to combat loneliness and provide some practical help. Once a spouse dies, support is emotional, based on comforting and listening. Then, following a period of adjustment, support evolves into companionship and encouragement with rebuilding a social life. Multiple perspectives facilitate a complete version of events and highlight how, in later life, if more than one sibling is widowed, companionship and socialising with siblings can become permanent, only reversing if re-marriage occurs, as will be discussed further in Chapter Nine (pages 238-239).

8.4 Gender differences in support exchange and companionship in later life

Although some brothers and sisters exchange support which fits with stereotypical male and female roles e.g. brothers doing DIY tasks and sisters cooking meals, there is overlap as highlighted earlier. Female participants (e.g. Abigail Bennett and Rebecca Reed) and male participants (e.g. Richard Silver, Gareth Silver, Adrian Grey, and Robert Grey) who only have brothers, report that brothers are supportive towards them currently, and have been in the past. For example, Abigail Bennett and Rebecca Reed receive a range of regular support from their brothers.

Regular support from brothers also occurs within sibling groups where sisters are available, proximate, and supportive. For example, Eric Brown is often his sisters' first choice of sibling to ask for support; Carl Black's siblings turn to him for advice, despite feeling able to ask any of their siblings for support; and Jack Scarlett's sister Karen tends to seek his advice and gain comfort from him. Female participants from the Bennett, the Black, the Brown, the Reed, and the White sibling groups, all exchange social support with their brothers such as going on theatre trips together or enjoying meals and conversation. Although some brothers like Eric Brown refer to being the "*man of the family*" nowadays, reciprocity is a significant reason for brothers being supportive towards sisters in later life. As highlighted earlier, Mark Bennett considers that his sister *deserves* attention for being loving and helpful to him, and his newfound sense of responsibility is about reciprocating this earlier care rather than brotherly duty. Participants from brother-only pairs (the Greys and the Silvers) also highlight that reciprocal support exchange is an important function of brothers' sibling relationships. However, my findings show that reciprocity influences supportive behaviour between siblings, irrespective of gender, and determines whether participants gain a sense of satisfaction from supporting their siblings in later life. Female participants also identify "*payback time*" (Charlotte Brown's term) as highly important.

Gender differences in the nature of support exchange within larger families are difficult to extricate because these sibling relationships are very interconnected and interdependent.

Furthermore, as I will draw attention to in Chapter Nine, upbringing and family culture are influential and remain so in later life, long after parents have died. Whether or not participants' family culture promoted a sense of belonging, seems to influence the emphasis which is placed on emotional, compared to practical support exchange, more than each participant's gender. In addition, the Black and Brown siblings spend a lot of time in the company of several siblings, of either sex, simultaneously, who all contribute to support, particularly in relation to illness or bereavement. However, multiple narrative voices indicate that gender does influence whether brothers or sisters perform certain roles sometimes. For example, within the Brown family, Charlotte takes the lead in hosting family gatherings; Diana helps to maintain the family grapevine; and, as discussed above, Eric is the dependable, younger brother. However, roles are interchangeable. Charlotte and Diana also provide support and assistance, and Eric has an important role in emotional support and companionship which he attributes to receiving *"a lot of care"* and being raised in a *"house of girls."* In fact, Eric describes comforting each other as typical supportive behaviour which centres on: *"making sure that anybody that needed comforting, or whatever, or just a shoulder to cry on, or err a few words, we were all there."*

The Black siblings' family culture is similar to the Browns' and support is exchanged between any one of them, irrespective of gender. Often when one of the Black siblings has a problem, the entire sibling group decide between them who is best placed to help. Who is chosen is mediated by the availability of time, geographical proximity, and specific needs, rather than gender. In a similar way to Eric Brown, Frank and Carl Black focus on comforting siblings in times of need which can be experienced, as Frank explains, just by siblings being present:

"The strange thing is, you can get together, it's how you can get support from silence isn't it? You know, there can be a group of the family all together, and you can not be saying much, but getting a lot of support."

Similarly, Anthony White concludes that being raised with sisters brought him in touch with his *“feminine side.”* In a similar way to Eric Brown, Anthony White was deemed to be the best sibling to provide support in a family crisis by his sisters. The impression that brothers are practical and dependable may be why some sisters choose to call upon a brother in a crisis. However, although this suggests there is some gender bias, as Eric Brown and Anthony White are also younger the members of their sibling groups, this merits further exploration.

As will be discussed further in Chapter Nine, some participants describe a family culture which promotes independence from family. Participants from these sibling groups tend to focus on support exchange in the form of moral support, advice, and practical support. For example, whilst Adrian Grey mentions how empathetic Robert was towards him when his wife died, he does not explicitly mention emotional support. He focuses on practical support and companionship and his overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Robert. This contrasts with the emotional description of support provided to Anthea Green by Carolyn when Anthea’s husband died which was about Carolyn *“being there”* and *“listening to me.”* Focusing less on emotional support is not unique to brother-only sibling groups. The Reed siblings focus on practical support, companionship, and encouraging each other to show resilience. As discussed earlier, Rebecca’s account of recent support received from David centres on his practical skills and, when asked about emotional support, she replies *“Emotionally? I don’t think [so], we’re not an emotional family.”* Furthermore, when Rebecca and Ralph mobilised in order to, as they perceive it, *“be there”* for David when his wife died and offer emotional support, David did not recognise it as such, recalling instead how Ralph encouraged him to travel abroad for the first time in his life.

Overall, the provision of help in families of more than two siblings is multi-dimensional in nature, can involve brothers and sisters playing a supportive role together, or a group of siblings discussing and deciding on who is the best person to help. Both male and female participants provide a range of emotional and practical support to brothers and sisters; and

participants of either sex do not highlight emotional support provided by brothers as inadequate or lacking. In fact, male and female participants use similar phrases to describe support from brothers. For example, Abigail Bennett and Adrian Grey talk about brothers who are so understanding that they “*shared my pain.*”

Although some gender differences in how support exchange manifests itself are noted, these are nuanced and largely influenced by participants’ family culture. However, participants also reveal that *changes* in the *nature* of support exchange occur over the life-course as the effects of gender stereotyping and family culture are modified. Jack Scarlett, for example, was raised in a family where brothers were privileged over sisters. Despite this resulting in Jack becoming detached from his siblings, emotional support exchange between Jack and his youngest sibling Karen has intensified over the life-course to the point where, despite geographical distance, Jack now confides in Karen. We saw earlier in this chapter (page 205) that Jack, who is one of the oldest participants in the study, has drawn closer to his siblings recently. This recent intensification of his relationships, particularly with Karen, seems to be influenced by need as Jack prepares himself for becoming a widower and his siblings show concern. Thus, another consideration when comparing support exchange between male and female participants and their siblings is the effect of widowhood. Some participants e.g. Anthea Green, Abigail Bennett, Mark Bennett, David Reed, and the Brown sisters, who are widowed and live alone, have experienced emotional support and increased closeness in their sibling relationships irrespective of gender and of their siblings’ marital status. For example, Carolyn Green and Eric Brown are married siblings who feel extremely close and protective towards their widowed siblings.

As also discussed earlier, increases in emotional closeness and support occur in response to a sibling becoming their spouse’s carer. In addition, Abigail Bennett, Frank Black, Anthea Green, Diana Brown, Carl Black and Jack Scarlett gave recent examples of siblings supporting them when they were ill. Brothers and sisters respond to siblings appearing vulnerable due to illness, describing emotions intensifying at such times. Thus, my

participants' accounts indicate that gender is less of a predictor of emotional support in later life than might be expected. So, although gender influences participants' expectations about the role that brothers and sisters play in support and companionship in later life in a nuanced way, support is not lacking, when needed, for participants without sisters. The preference for a particular type of support from brothers compared to sisters is evident in some sibling groups. Participants' supportive behaviour appears to be influenced by their family culture, an effect which is modified in response to changes in life-course transitions. In later life, it is evident that participants of either sex exchange a wide range of support with their brothers and sisters.

8.5 Perceptions about the availability of support in the future

Participants' narratives support the notion that knowing siblings can be called on for support if needed is as important as actual support (see Chapter Three, page 51). Very few participants would not call on a sibling for support, or believe that their sibling would not call on them. No-one would not help a sibling should they be the person that their sibling needed. Even during periods of their lives when they did not need support, participants felt it would be available, a view illustrated by Abigail Bennett:

"I don't think either of us probably needed support, except to know that we had a sibling there, who could be called on at any time, and we would ring each other up [...] and when we needed each other, we knew exactly that they would be there."

Charlotte Brown describes the sense of comfort which "*knowing that they're there*" provides. Even during times of less contact her siblings have "*always been in the background*", providing reassurance that she has "*got them if I need them.*" Charlotte is also confident that they would provide support immediately if required: "*We've only got to pick a phone up to anybody and they're here, Just like that. {clicks fingers} No quibble. No argument, you know.*"

Even participants who have not needed to call upon a sibling and are geographically dispersed from them, feel that a sibling could be called upon as Richard Silver sums up:

“I’ve never had a situation where I’ve needed or wanted to turn to him for major support and I think that’s more just by luck than by judgement to be honest, it’s just circumstances [...] I wouldn’t hesitate if I needed to, I absolutely wouldn’t hesitate, because I know that he would be supportive.”

However, because participants’ confidence that siblings will be there for them if needed is attributed to their mutual history of support, participants who are not able to be as supportive as they used to be express disappointment, as Abigail Bennett notes:

“I feel if only I could be a little more help to him now, but of course it’s still mostly from him to me, because I am not a lot of use.”

The feelings of uselessness and helplessness expressed by some participants are concerning, and indicate how important it is for them to continue to be able to exchange support with their siblings.

In summary, some participants who feel their siblings will be supportive have not yet needed sibling support, and others, although willing to support, find it difficult to provide the level of support they would like to. The majority of participants are also concerned about becoming a burden to adult children and seem reluctant to receive support from them. For example, Abigail Bennett’s son and his wife have built an annex onto their house so that she can live with them. However, Abigail prefers to remain close to Mark because, with his support, she can continue living independently. Taking this one step further, some participants feel they could live with a sibling in later life if the need arises. As discussed earlier (see Chapter Six, page 143), the Black siblings already have two brothers living together in the parental home, so there is a precedent in their family and an assumption that, if necessary, other siblings

could join the two brothers. Because they go on holiday together as a group, they know that they get along well when under one roof. They joke with each other about winning the lottery so, as Belinda explains, they could: *“all live together, so we can look after each other.”* The Peacock siblings also mention that their mother successfully lived with her brother in later life.

Participants who focus on sibling support in a social and emotional way, feel that living with a sibling in later life is feasible because they could provide companionship and some practical support. However, some participants such as Liam Coal feel that the extreme circumstances which would result in him being unable to live alone would warrant specialist support. Under these circumstances, Liam would prefer to go into a home rather than, as he sees it, make his sister responsible for him. Liam’s view that the support needed will be of too great an intensity for a sibling who is in later life themselves to cope with, suggests that support exchange between siblings in later life might reach a point beyond which it is not feasible. Based on his experience of their grandfather living with them in old age, Liam believes that:

“looking after anybody in old age is a specialist job. I think it needs specialist skills, I do to be honest, and it’s better for a nursing home, or some similar situation to take care of that.”

Henry Scarlett, who looked after his father-in-law over a period of ten years and witnessed both of his own parents dying, explains that it isn’t about rejecting siblings, but having realistic knowledge and understanding of the level of responsibility that caring for him in later life might place on them, and feeling that this is not the right thing to do. Several participants have first-hand knowledge and experience having witnessed a parent care for a grandparent, or having cared for a parent or parent-in-law in later life themselves.

So, although participants willingly contemplate helping their siblings in the near future, there is less certainty about the distant future. Rebecca Reed is planning to be supportive towards David if he needs a hip operation, and David mentions that *“If Ralph was really in dire need of anything, it’d be, you know, then it would be go and help out, do something you know.”* However, if one of them was unable to live alone, Rebecca is less certain about the best course of action. Ralph describes the three of them as self-reliant and admires his siblings’ *“resilience”*, mentioning that *“we’ve never really had to be supportive of each other, because we’ve always been pretty, how can I put it, self-sufficient.”*

A small number of participants are concerned about burdening their siblings and seem reluctant to call on them for support. For instance, Doris White mentions, *“I just feel I’ve got to cope on my own. I’ve had to cope for the last thirty years...”* Even siblings who see each other every day and whose social life centres around them, such as Charlotte Brown, value independence from each other. Having them nearby and being able to see them whenever she wants is the right balance. Similarly, Mark Bennett expressed the view that:

“I’m an independent person actually. I always tend to do things, because I wanted to do them, and certainly would take responsibility, I would never expect to share responsibility with anybody.”

So, some participants would be reluctant to ask a sibling for support in the form of *care-giving* in old age because they assume that this type of support would be too intensive and burdensome. This is interesting, because they do not feel the same about current or past support exchange. Whilst considering whether they would be prepared to depend on a sibling in old age, several participants likened it to receiving support from an adult child, which they are also reluctant to do. Those who feel that they could live together and support each other in old age, view this in a social or emotional way and imagine mutual support.

8.6 Conclusion

Siblings are clearly important providers of support for most participants. Support which participants receive from their siblings currently includes emotional support, particularly during difficult times; encouragement, moral support, and advice; companionship and social support; and practical support, such as help with everyday tasks. Although supportive behaviours such as cooking a meal, combine both social and practical aspects of support, this type of support receives less emphasis than crisis-driven support, because routine help is seen as a normative function of sibling relationships and can, therefore, be overlooked, due to the perception that it has always been part of a sibling's role. Supportive behaviour and companionships increase in later in life, even within sibling groups who have not been supportive in the past, in response to a number of transitions. Because many siblings have a long-standing history of supportive behaviour, reciprocity is an additional important feature of sibling support exchange. Of concern, however, is the finding that some participants who are no longer able to provide as much support as they used to, feel useless, and some participants are reluctant to accept support for fear of becoming a nuisance.

An unexpected finding is that, following the transition into widowhood, support from siblings alters as participants adjust and their needs change. Sibling support in response to widowhood is about comfort initially, and then encouragement to help a widowed sibling re-establish social interests. Overall, participants report that both brothers and sisters are supportive, and gender seems to be less relevant to supportive behaviour in later life than the influence of family culture earlier in life. However, for some participants, the effects of family culture are dissipating too.

All of the participants lived independently and in their own homes and so care-giving involving intimate and personal care was not a significant issue. However, a wide range of sibling exchanges involving specific support activities were highlighted amongst participants. For some older participants those support exchanges were becoming more

routine and frequent, and/or developing into care amongst some of the oldest participants. Some participants were conscious that formal sibling care-giving could arise in the future and raised concerns about potential barriers, such as health and mobility problems, that might prevent sibling care-giving, including maintaining current levels of support provided by and between siblings at the time of the research interviews. As I discuss in Chapter Ten (see page 277), given the likelihood that sibling care-giving will increase in the future it is a concern that sibling support and care-giving receive scant research or policy attention.

In later life, some participants have particularly significant sibling relationships and are concerned about what will happen in the future if one of them loses the other. Although some participants would consider living with siblings, others express concern that the level of support they might require would be too great for their sibling to cope with. However, participants who exchange support currently with their siblings do not view it as burdensome, and find that their sibling relationships are taking on new meaning in later life. They are companions once more who enjoy time together just as siblings. As also discussed in this chapter, in later life, bereavement and illness are most likely to elicit sibling support. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, earlier in life, other life-events and transitions were foregrounded. Thus, in Chapter Nine, I turn my attention to the history of participants' sibling relationships across the life-course, highlighting how their biographical narratives reveal what shaping effects have been influential in determining the nature of their current relationships.

Chapter Nine: The nature of sibling relationships across the life-course

9.0 Introduction

In this chapter I draw attention to the importance and meaning that participants ascribe to their sibling relationships across the life-course. Drawing on participants' biographically constructed narratives, I consider the ways in which the socio-historical contexts of early family life, sibling group structure, and life-course transitions, influence and help explain the later life sibling relationships discussed in Chapters Six to Eight. In so doing, I address research questions three and four. I begin this chapter by considering how family culture and sibling group structure shape siblings' early relationships. Next, I consider how family life-course transitions alter participants' motivation and opportunities to spend time with their siblings. Finally, I discuss the nature of siblings' contact routines and the ebb and flow in emotional closeness and support across the life-course. This chapter highlights the meaning participants ascribe to their sibling relationships in their entirety, as well as the interplay between sibling group structure, family context and culture, and life-course events.

9.1 Socio-historical contexts of early family life

Many of the participants who were interviewed for this study were children in or around the Second World War or post-War austerity period, and their family lives were often characterised by separation and disruption; the devastating effects of infectious childhood illness such as Scarlet fever and Whooping cough; post-War austerity and rationing; and different expectations about intergenerational living arrangements. Participants' accounts of these difficult, often frightening and uncertain times are vivid, and yet, also include cherished memories of small, comforting acts of kindness from siblings which are valued as much as recent episodes of support.

How parents, particularly mothers, navigated their way through these disruptions to family life was important in shaping what came next. For example, several participants experienced themselves or their seriously ill sibling being sent away to an isolation ward and, later, to a convalescent hospital. When this happened to Anthea Green, only her mother was permitted to visit. During the twelve months Anthea was away, her sister Carolyn wrote to her, and this experience brought out feelings of protectiveness towards Anthea from Carolyn that endured. Furthermore, the Green sisters' life-long habit of ensuring each knows they are being thought about whilst apart, stems from this first separation.

It is beyond the scope of this discussion to include all accounts of participants' War and post-War experiences, but they commonly focus on the role that mothers, aunts and grandparents played in keeping families together. Participants' childhood memories often relate to sharing food, which was rationed, and those from larger families recall how sharing limited resources was a general family value which extended to include physical space, material possessions and emotions. Evie Black has a significant memory of breaking an egg, during the period when eggs were rationed and no more were available. Evie still appreciates the significant sacrifice that her brother, Carl, made at the time when he immediately said: "*You can have mine, I don't want one.*" This memory illustrates her life-long experience of Carl as a kind, loving older brother. Similar accounts from other participants highlight how siblings sharing things, and being kind earlier in life, are remembered into later life.

As introduced in Chapters Seven and Eight, *family culture* and the role that parents play in promoting it, is an important influence on how participants relate now to their siblings in later life. Although parents, particularly mothers, are credited with promoting participants' sense

of belonging to their sibling group and their helping behaviours, the influence of wider family culture is evident in the way that participants recall family traditions being enriched by close involvement with extended family members, particularly grandparents, aunts and uncles. In addition, the kind of family that siblings grew up in was influenced by cultural norms that dominated family life and shaped the role of parents and children.

Despite the dominance of traditional family values, there is significant diversity in participants' accounts of their early family life. For example, as the pen portraits presented in Chapter Six highlight, *one family type* recalled by participants, particularly those raised at home, is where shared home-life and the influence of parents was central to their childhood sibling relationships (see pages 142-143). Parents promoted harmony, discouraged negativity and encouraged them to get on with their siblings: family values which they subsequently instilled in their own children and grandchildren. It is noticeable that some participants speak collectively, using terms such as "*we all*" or "*those of us*", when talking about their siblings. This portrays their lasting sense of togetherness and their belief that they can express their siblings' viewpoints because they share the same values. In addition, participants highlight that current feelings of safety, security, and contentment with their sibling relationships, as described in Chapter Seven (pages 159-160), arose during childhood. For instance, the collective narrative voices of the Black and the Brown siblings demonstrate what Carl Black terms the "*special gain*" of growing up together in a loving environment created by loving parents. Eric Brown elaborates on the concept of the centrality of family when he recalls that the Brown siblings were brought up to view each other as "*the sort of nucleus*", by parents who "*instilled in us that we are family, and family is a very, very important part [of life].*"

Another *family type* is one in which at least one, and sometimes both parents, prioritised, for at least some of their children, achievements and independence over and above the centrality of family, and tended to be less involved with extended family networks. Some of these participants spent significant periods of their childhood apart at boarding schools or living with aunts and uncles. The White siblings' experience indicates that experiencing problematic parental relationships can draw siblings closer. Despite their privileged background, they describe their parents neglecting them emotionally, both individually and collectively (see Chapter Six, page 151). As children, the White siblings confided in each other about hopes, aspirations and ambitions, whilst showing empathy and understanding about their parental relationships. However, the influence of their parents in shaping their sense of family pride and values emerges from their narratives too. Their parents' achievements, standing in society, moral compass and political views, shaped their own shared political opinions, sense of fair play and opportunities. Furthermore, their sense of what belonging to their family means endures and, as discussed in Chapter Seven (page 165), their recall of events that happened to the others is strong, despite periods apart, because they maintain a fierce interest in each other. So, what arose as a result of compensating for parental absence earlier in life, combined with their family culture of socialising, entertaining, communicating, and debating, is relevant to their current late life sibling relationships. Their experience also demonstrates that for some, an extended family network does not need to be proximate or intense in order to work, which may be of significance for more geographically dispersed contemporary families.

It should also be noted that diversity exists and therefore family culture appears to be more of a continuum than a dichotomy. Although the influence of the culture of participants' families of origin persists into later life, it is modified by *family structure* which contributes to the *nature* and *amount* of time spent with siblings at various points in the life-course, which is important in developing and maintaining an invested interest in each other. Family

structure, for instance, shaped whether siblings were experienced as friends, companions, role models, or surrogate parents. Factors such as age spacing, family size and gender balance, influence the bonding and attachment which occurs in childhood and remains significant throughout life.

Different *age gaps* between siblings meant that sibling relationships were experienced differently for those widely spaced compared to those closely spaced, particularly in childhood and early adulthood and, as discussed in Chapter Eight (page 194), this has implications for support in later life. Many participants recall siblings *close in age* as childhood playmates, because close age spacing provides opportunity to share more childhood experiences. The Grey brothers provide a typical example of this experience. Robert and Adrian barely mention parents and foreground their time spent alone together, recalling proudly their shared belief that they could tackle anything together. Mutual encouragement facilitated what Robert terms “*physical courage*” and feeling like a team was facilitated by their similar ages, interests and abilities, as Adrian notes:

“As three brothers, you know, we were often seen together [...] we’d sing in the choir together [...] we’d go out together, we were particularly close in the Scouts [...] There weren’t many, sort of, similar aged boys who were pretty strong, pretty fit [...] If we turned up, you know, it meant a big thing on any activity, especially camping [...] I might have run the scout troop for a while, you know, later on when I was perhaps nineteen, Robert at seventeen would have been in charge of the food, and Thomas my brother would have been in charge of sort of anything adventurous [...] So obviously, we grew up quite close together.”

Wide age spacing led to some older siblings caring for younger ones, and some of the strongest feelings are described by participants whose siblings are not close to them in age because these *caretaker-like sibling relationships* are considered to be special, and result in enduring attachments. Felicity and Charlotte Brown's relationship provides a typical example of a caretaker-like sibling relationship between siblings from a *large family*. Charlotte notes: "*When I was a baby I was always with her and so that must last mustn't it?*" From Charlotte's perspective, being cared for by Felicity, her "*surrogate mum*", makes their relationship special. Similarly, her brother Eric recalls receiving "*a lot of care*" from older sisters who, as discussed in Chapter Eight (page 198), he perceives as mothering him even now. This view of an older sibling as a surrogate parent arises amongst participants whose family culture led to eldest children becoming parental helpers, being viewed as normative. For instance, the Brown and the Black siblings' large family size necessitated working mothers relying on their eldest children to care for the younger children and some eldest siblings, like Evie Black, who continued to live in the family home once a parent herself, raised younger siblings alongside their own children. In fact, Evie describes having a "*special bond*" with her younger siblings because they "*felt like mine.*"

Wide age spacing between siblings in larger families confers the benefit of extending supportive behaviour when generations overlapped. For example, older siblings raised younger siblings alongside their own children; middle siblings reciprocated earlier care by babysitting their older siblings' children; and younger siblings developed sibling-like relationships with nieces and nephews who are age-peers. This extended family, linked and promoted flexibility because experiencing fluidity in family structure during childhood, made these participants more adaptable now, as discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 163-164).

Caretaker-like sibling relationships were also evident in *smaller* families (see pages 141 and 150). There are parallels between Abigail Bennett's and Gareth Silver's experiences of forming strong attachments to their younger siblings and taking on protective roles as a result of adversity in family life. In the Bennetts' case, their parents struggle to manage their difficult older brother, led to Abigail finding solace in her new baby brother, Mark. She delighted in this relationship and treated him as if he was "*my little baby*." Mark recalls how Abigail, rather than his parents, stimulated his life-long appreciation of music:

"She took me to my first concert, which I always remember. I remember to this day [...] coz I've loved music ever since. So, she was a very strong influence on me."

The Silver brothers also experienced a difficult home life which Richard recalls his older brother, Gareth, compensating for: "*[Gareth] took the time and sat with me and did stuff*" whilst their parents were "*too busy arguing with each other*." Thus, these participants describe the advantages of a caretaker-like sibling relationship as allowing older and younger siblings to spend time together away from their parents; older siblings learning parenting skills and sharing their interests with younger siblings; and younger siblings feeling secure and benefitting from an older sibling's encouragement and interest. Doris White also notes that involvement with younger siblings combats loneliness and provides an antidote to emotional turmoil: "*It's good for older, sort of, perhaps difficult adolescent children to have little ones who love them. Yes, this is the thing, often, they love you unconditionally back*." Whether care-taker like sibling relationships arose out of parental expectation or adversity, participants who experienced this type of relationship often spent more time together than age-peer siblings and frequently describe their sibling relationships as special.

An additional and unique feature of *large family size* that had an important shaping effect on sibling relationships, is that it necessitated siblings working together to run the home. Multiple narrative voices illustrate how the Brown and the Black siblings' parents fostered collectiveness, and a life-long habit of sharing and co-operating stems from their earlier sharing of activities, chores, emotions and possessions. They also learnt to negotiate at a young age because, as Charlotte Brown recalls, a lack of physical space meant that there was no opportunity to *"flounce off to another room"*, so parents taught them to settle arguments quickly. Their doctrine of *"plain speaking"* (Eric Brown's term) encouraged them to *"say what you think, talk about it, and settle it"* and remains significant in promoting high levels of honest, openness and trust, significant features of many participants' current sibling relationships (see Chapter Seven, page 159).

The *socio-cultural influence of gender* became apparent early in life too, and led to divergence in sibling relationships because societal gender norms encouraged same-sex friendships and the development of different interests. Thus, opposite-sex siblings who had been childhood playmates, recall a phase where they had less in common and mixed in different social circles. For example, Anita and Anthony White, supportive friends in early childhood who played together, comforted each other, and negotiated learning a foreign language together, recall their lives diverging. According to Anita, Anthony started doing *"those kind of boyish things"* with a male friend and Anthony recalls a distinction between *"active play"* outdoors with his mate and *"just hanging around"* indoors with Anita, who became *"bookish"* and *"self-sufficient"*. Despite enjoying each other's company, they developed different interests and, once they were sent away to boarding school, their lives only converged during the school holidays. Then, as Anita entered her teenage years, the age gap became significant and Anthony recalls, *"Anita had an active social life from friends and I was baby brother, you know a little brother."*

For the Scarlett siblings, the socio-cultural influence of gender was more extreme and became divisive. Their multiple accounts reveal how normative assumptions about gendered family roles during the era in which they were raised, created beliefs within their family that girls were inferior. Thus, Sharon, as the eldest girl, undertook all caring and household duties, was denied much of an education and isolated from her age peers. Henry Scarlett recalls her being treated like a *“live-in servant”* by their parents. Sharon sometimes felt resentful towards the siblings in her charge and reports no special bond. Also, whereas male participants from other mixed-sex sibling groups spent time playing with their sisters and doing chores with them, Jack was raised to view Sharon as merely *“a girl after all”*, which promoted division and also resulted in the two sets of Scarlett siblings seeming *“separated by time.”* On reflection, Henry feels empathy about the detrimental effect their upbringing had on his sisters, and notes:

“My two sisters really got a bad deal out of life and out of their childhood. My father was, well misogynistic really, err but sexist to an extreme. I think he regarded women as just being there to be his servants.”

The Scarlett sisters’ extreme situation, compared to other female participants, should be contextualised by considering that during the era they were growing up, different treatment due to gender was common. Furthermore, the Scarlett siblings’ relationships have been shaped by life-course events and changes in societal norms which gradually allowed earlier division to be overcome.

Although Rebecca Reed recalls no division within the home creating disharmony or making her feel inferior, as the younger sister of two brothers, she does recall being raised in a *“macho environment”* where restrictions were placed on her because of conservative views about gender roles and expectations in post-War Britain. This prevented her from having *“boys’ toys”* e.g. bicycles, or from playing *“boys’ games.”* However, the Reed siblings’

experience illustrates that although some brothers had privileges, gender stereotyping also restricted them too, albeit differently. For the Reeds, this “*division of the sexes*” meant David’s childhood was cut short because he helped his parents to run the family business from a young age. Furthermore, when their father died prematurely, Ralph provided for their widowed mother on an apprentice’s wages. Similarly, after his father died prematurely, Len Peacock took on extra work in order to help his widowed mother financially. These participants rarely blame siblings for parents’ choices which they recognise resulted from family culture, societal expectations and difficult circumstances. Some participants, who were privileged over their siblings earlier in life, show empathy and guilt because they have subsequently been influenced by changes in societal norms during their life-course. When reflecting back on their sibling relationships, childhood experiences and the influence of family culture are considered to be the mortar that cements sibling relationships together.

9.2 Ebb and flow in the nature of sibling relationships across the life-course

Although participants’ narratives reveal that sibling relationships are especially important to them at particular times, as Mark Bennett points out they are “*not continually important*” for everyone. However, lessening in importance doesn’t mean unimportant because participants describe their sibling relationships as still there in the background, particularly when life transitions such as parenthood and working life altered their opportunity to spend time with them, and particularly if coupled with geographical dispersal.

Ebb and flow in sibling relationships is described by participants across the life-course, beginning in childhood for some and early adulthood for others, and continuing into later life. In addition to the lessening of sibling ties that some participants report during middle childhood and adolescence, most participants also recall their siblings lessening in importance once they developed a greater sense of self and/or prioritised romantic

partnerships. For instance, Elizabeth White describes a process of self-discovery leading to a shift in focus away from her siblings to *“being me.”* Some participants who are younger siblings, felt disconnected from their older siblings when their older siblings experienced changing life-course experiences ahead of them, thus creating periods of non-shared experience. Older siblings such as Evie Black and David Reed were married while their younger siblings were at still school. This created temporary distance because older and younger siblings felt in *“different spaces”* to each other (Charlotte Brown’s term). This also explains why, during their early years together, Anita and Anthony White recall their elder sisters as *“fascinating adults”* who visited during the summer holidays; while Alison Black experienced her oldest siblings as *“visitors”*.

Ebb and flow in closeness, rather than linear change, is apparent because, as Carolyn Green explains, once her sister Anthea entered adolescence, reconnection occurred. They felt: *“nearly formed then [...] we’d concentrated on self [...] we were [...] strong enough to blend really.”* Similarly, the Scarlett sisters’ relationships blossomed once both sisters were teenagers, as did Jack and Karen Scarlett’s relationships once they were both adults. In fact, their experience demonstrates that attitudes towards siblings can change with maturity even in the absence of strong foundations. Once Jack got to know Karen as an adult he recalls his attitude changing and that they renegotiated their relationship:

“I realised that [Karen] was a really nice girl and we have become better and better friends as life has gone on, and I love her now [...] in those early years I was behaving rather selfishly.”

Karen, once an adult, felt able to respond favourably, rather than defensively towards Jack:

“He was just so appreciative and nice and complimentary, and he no longer treated me like I was an awkward brat [...] I felt as though his regard made me sort of bloom or blossom. He was just really nice [...] I gravitated to him and warmed to that, and then I really, I think, I got to know him [...] he’d grown up and he’d got children, and so had I, so maybe we’d both matured. I don’t know really what it was, but I do remember being just so really pleasantly surprised that we could have such pleasure in each other’s company.”

Due to differences in family culture and structure, there is diversity in the manner in which participants first experienced more lasting separation from their siblings, and in the effects that separation had. Participants who shared more experiences prior to adulthood, felt an abrupt *“severing of the relationship”* (Adrian Grey), or *“wrench”* (Anthea Green, Karen Scarlett) when parting. This resulted from their sibling moving away geographically, as if they were not ready for the change, which is a contrast to the phased drifting apart described earlier in this chapter by Anita and Anthony White (see page 228). The Grey brothers did not experienced divergence in their sibling relationships until they lived apart when, Robert recalls, *“there was definitely a period of moving away, to some degree, from each other.”* For participants like Charlotte Brown who remained proximate to siblings, feeling independent of them occurred later, once married and raising children. Charlotte describes being so *“busy concentrating on your own family that you don’t think about the relationship, [because] once you start to become independent they’re not as important.”* By way of contrast, Liam Coal became independent of his sister whilst a child because, being sent away to boarding school, set a pattern of not expecting to *“rely”* on Hilary for anything.

Although sibling relationships go through changes during early childhood, and then again in middle to late adolescence as participants *transitioned* into adulthood, life-course transitions experienced *during* adulthood affect participants' family life, altering their motivation and opportunity to be with their siblings. Despite participants viewing sibling relationships as ever present, accounts of ebb and flow in sibling relationships during specific life-course transitions such as marriage, parenthood, widowhood and various stages of working life, indicate that sibling relationships are fluid and, as will be explained below, some transitions affect male and female participants' sibling relationships differently.

The primary shaping effect of *marriage* on participants' sibling relationships appears to result from differences or similarities between participants' and spouses' family cultures. Thus, whether family cultures are compatible or incompatible explains why, paradoxically, some participants feel marriage leads to sibling relationships drifting apart, whereas others feel marriage strengthens sibling relationships. As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 178), family cultures which encourage brothers and sisters-in-law to be adopted into sibling groups extend them, altering sibling relationships to relationships between couples in the process. For example, all three White sisters experience their relationships with Anthony as existing between them and Anthony and his wife, Rachel. From Anthony's perspective, he recognises that he has rarely seen his siblings on his own since he married. Anthony believes that becoming part of a couple in early adulthood made it easier for his sisters to accept Rachel into the family. He notes: "*Rachel and I coming together so soon, as I say, may be significant as my sisters have seen us develop as a couple.*" As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 179), when sibling relationships transition into relationships between couples, the question about how participants feel about a sibling they rarely see alone becomes difficult to answer.

As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 180), Rebecca Reed attributes divergence in her sibling relationships following marriage to a family culture which encouraged her brothers to *“go the way of their wives’ partners, so it’ll be their partner’s families that are heavily involved.”* Rebecca’s view that her brothers became less motivated to maintain sibling relationships once they married is corroborated by them. Conversely, male participants who describe marriage strengthening their sibling relationships following drift during their single years, attribute this to their wives’ positive influence in bringing the married couples together. An example of this is provided by the Grey brothers. During the period when Adrian Grey was married and Robert single, Adrian recalls: *“Once you’re married it’s inevitable the relationship, you know, should really be less [...] sort of close”* and, despite maintaining contact, *“the real, real, close empathy, would have been less.”* However, Robert recalls that once he married too, the brothers became emotionally closer because their relationship was cemented by the influence of their wives who got on *“extremely well”*.

Marriage and parenthood affected many female participants’ sibling relationships differently to males, due to gender differences in career and family trajectories at that time. Some male participants are unable to separate the effect of marriage on their sibling relationships from the effects of juggling careers and family life. However, many female participants remained connected to their families of origin for longer than their brothers, only leaving home to get married, or sometimes after they married. In addition, remaining proximate to families of origin means that these female participants *“kept in”* (Charlotte Brown’s term) with nearby sisters by sharing childcare arrangements, something which Anthea Green also recalls when she describes how her and Carolyn shared a daily routine during their early married years when they raised their sons together:

“We saw each other every single day when we’d got our children. We had a routine that I would go down to her house and then from her house we would walk into the town one day we used to go to the clinic another day we’d go to the library another day we’d do this another day we’d shop and we always ended up [...] meeting me mum from work and going for a cup of tea with me mum and then it was time to go home and get the hubbies’ teas on but we saw each other every single solitary day [...] we never wanted anybody else other than our own families you know. We just didn’t bother...”

Once they returned to work, support continued as the Green sisters divided after-school and school holiday childcare arrangements between them. Their companionship and mutual support began during pregnancy, intensified whilst their sons were growing up, and has continued into later life.

Similarly, the Brown, the Black, and to a lesser extent, the White sisters, have histories of babysitting, raising children together, and sharing concerns about the younger generation. Although reciprocal childcare arrangements are facilitated by living nearby, some female participants who are geographically distant from their sisters, feel parenthood itself enhanced their sibling relationships. For instance, Anita White, who is a decade younger than her sisters, recalls how parenthood brought them closer. Although Anita feels *“it wasn’t about being parents, it was about being sisters,”* having common ground altered her perspective and parenthood was a catalyst for promoting a newfound sense of sisterhood, as she had previously always defined herself as an older sister to a younger brother.

Some male participants also feel that parenthood drew them closer to their siblings. Mark Bennett believes this was facilitated by his and Abigail's children being spaced in a “step-wise manner” namely: *“[Abigail] had Sean first, then I had Emily, and then she had Lee, then I had Susan.”* However, whilst Abigail built up her successful career, their mother cared for her children and facilitated opportunistic meetings between Abigail and Mark when she gathered her grandchildren together. Liam Coal too felt closer to his sister, Hilary, when their children were young, because their widowed mother arranged family gatherings every Easter. Thus, earlier in their married lives, it is evident that some participants' mothers were acting as family kin-keepers highlighting the interdependency of family relationships.

Likewise, some participants who did not have their children at similar times to their siblings, also describe parenthood as a transition which brought them closer. Although the large age gap between Gareth and Richard Silver has resulted in their children being a generation apart, Richard's later transition into parenthood drew them closer emotionally and, as he notes, he values Gareth's expertise and seeks his guidance on parenting matters:

“When you're worried about something with your kids, making some kind of decision or wondering, or worried about something [...] I would talk to him and I've got a lot of respect for his views about a lot of things, to do with that kind of stuff.”

On the other hand, some male participants recall parenthood reducing the time they had to spend with siblings which, as Carl Black explains, lessens involvement but not feelings:

“I think you get so involved in your own little nuclear family to not quite have the same amount of time and care for the wider family, but, you know, the interest's always there with them...”

Although there were some exceptions, most male and female participants tended to experience the dichotomy between family and work life differently and therefore recall ebb and flow in their sibling relationships differently. Amongst these participants, gender differences arose because brothers left home to undergo compulsory National Service, take up apprenticeships, go to University or take up employment whereas, as discussed above (page 234), sisters often remained in or near to the parental home for longer and those who are from working-class backgrounds recall that they left school at fifteen to work in the same factories or offices as their mothers and sisters, which helped to maintain those connections for longer. Some female participants who moved away to pursue careers did this later than male participants, once their children were older, and some returned to education when their children went to school, prior to embarking on careers. Because male participants experienced career building and parenthood together, their time to spend with siblings was limited. Frank Black's comment about the practical difficulties that his working life created is fairly typical:

"At one time when I was working err I got dragged into err a series of, you know, working long hours, working later, err and my job took me away a bit..."

A common theme running through participants' narratives is that some *adverse family life-course* events disrupt family structures and commitments to family members, thereby affecting sibling ties. However, although the loss of key relationships such as parents, marital partners and other siblings tends to elicit sibling support, some adverse life-course events such as divorce do not. Thus, I turn my attention here to how participants negotiate changes in sibling relationships in response to key family relationships being lost, either due to bereavement or dissolution.

As noted earlier, marriage significantly affects sibling relationships. Therefore, it stands to reason that changes in marital status or marital partners, as a result of divorce, widowhood or re-marriage, will affect sibling relationships too. Moreover, the effects of changes in marital status provide insight into the relative contribution of marriage, divorce, re-marriage and widowhood on the ebb and flow in importance of participants' sibling relationships across the life-course. The multiple voices of participants from the same sibling groups indicate that the effects of divorce and re-marriage are complicated. Although, as discussed earlier, sibling relationships in early and middle adulthood were mediated by some participants' mothers, relationships between participants, their siblings and their siblings' partners/former partners, were also mediated by their own spouses. Thus, re-marriage is complicated by the interconnectedness of all parties involved as one participant explains: *"We like [my sibling's spouse], but we are not as close as we were to [their former spouse]."* It seems that because friendships are forged with in-laws, divorce divides loyalties whereas widowhood does not. Several participants and their spouses were disappointed when a sibling divorced, because they had a good relationship with their sibling's former spouse. Use of the inclusive pronoun "we" in their narratives emphasises unity between participants and spouses, and acknowledges spouses' contributions in shaping opinions about in-laws.

Despite divided loyalties, remaining friends with a former in-law makes it easier to continue relationships with nieces and nephews. Furthermore, divorced participants have been more likely to re-marry than widowed participants, meaning that divorce has been more transient than widowhood. One re-married participant notes that a new spouse may draw negative attention to a sibling's character that went unnoticed before:

"[My current spouse] has always found [my sibling and their spouse] quite difficult [...] I think that has made me conscious of the things that [my spouse] finds difficult, which you know actually I find difficult as well in a way [...] had I stayed together with [my ex-spouse], my relationship with [my sibling] might have been different."

When elaborating further, this participant attributes differences in attitude towards their sibling to their current and former spouses' *"different backgrounds"*. This reveals how sibling relationships of married participants are influenced by the relative compatibilities of their own and their spouse's family culture. As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 179-180), conflict between a sibling and a participant's spouse is rare, sometimes only surfacing following divorce as one participant recalls: *"It was only after we split up that [my sibling] told me they couldn't stand [my ex]."* Not surprisingly, those who experienced tension in a sibling-in-law relationship report that their sibling relationship improved once their sibling-in-law was no longer on the scene.

The White siblings have experienced the most divorce and re-marriage and, although there have been no tensions in any of their in-law relationships, they demonstrate how divorce and re-marriage redefine allegiances between married couples, as Anita White reveals:

"My first husband, Sean, in a sense brought me closer to Doris, because he and Doris's husband got on very well [...] so we used to go see them a lot. With my second husband, he didn't get on so well with Doris and her husband, and a lot of this is about North/South metropolitan [...] but we got on well with Elizabeth."

Doris and Elizabeth White corroborate Anita's view that a spouse's cultural identity influences allegiances between married couples. During her single years living in the South of England, Doris describes Elizabeth and her husband, George, as *"home for me."* However, once married to *"a Northerner"* Doris's allegiances shifted when she relocated to the North of England, nearer to her younger siblings, who her husband felt aligned to culturally: particularly Anita's first husband, a fellow Northerner. Further changes happened when Doris's younger siblings relocated and identified as Southerners. Later, Doris and Elizabeth rekindled their relationship when Elizabeth's remarriage also brought her to the North of England. Finally, Elizabeth's move back to the South of England brought her closer

to Anthony with whom she shares interests and a common outlook, as discussed in Chapter Seven (page 168). Thus, the White sisters' changes in marital partners, and associated geographical moves, shifted allegiances based on relative proximity and cultural identity.

The White siblings also reveal that siblings are less available to support each other following divorce, if it coincides with times when siblings' attentions are focussed elsewhere. Although Anita White felt supported and reconnected with her siblings following her first divorce, the difficult family circumstances surrounding her second divorce left her reflecting on whether she received adequate sibling support. Anita is mindful that her needs were extremely high because she was caring for their ageing mother and her own daughter. As her sisters' narratives clarify, Doris and Elizabeth were experiencing difficult times themselves and legitimate problems restricted support particularly as they did not live nearby. Similarly, the timing of Doris's divorce, which followed their father's death, meant that her siblings were focused on their mother who, Doris notes, was *"very, very bereaved and took it very badly."* Doris, on reflection, feels her siblings misunderstood what a *"terrific bereavement"* the *"breaking up of a wonderful, of a whole life"* is. The White siblings' accounts suggest that if individuals are struggling to support several family members simultaneously, they prioritise children and parents before siblings.

Additional insight is offered by Len Peacock who received help from his nearby mother when he divorced and became a single parent, which alleviated the loneliness his mother was experiencing, lifted her spirits, and gave her a new purpose in life. Len's sisters had emigrated by then and were unable to support him. Len, who draws attention to the fact that his experience of divorce and single parenthood was rare at the time, supports Doris White's assertion that the impact of divorce may be misunderstood because it was relatively rare. In fact, the Brown siblings reveal that it was a taboo subject for them. It is possibly no

coincidence that despite being in a stable, long-term marriage himself, the experience of living with unhappily married parents who later divorced influenced Gareth Silver's attitude towards his brother Richard's divorce. Having recalled that his parents' *"divorce procedures were very difficult"* and not amicable, Gareth seemed keen to avoid tension when Richard divorced. Richard recalls receiving support at a distance from Gareth, appreciated his moral support and approval, and found it was important that Gareth did not make negative judgements:

"He was very quick to make it clear to me that if I thought that was the right thing to be doing, then that was the right thing to be doing, as far as he was concerned. He didn't try and manipulate, or interfere, or persuade at all."

In terms of the lasting effects, Gareth supported Richard and maintained a good relationship with Richard's former spouse, enabling family relationships to continue. This is significant because Richard has children by his first and his second wife. Furthermore, Gareth describes his relationships with his sisters-in-law as important relationships, compensating for the fact that he is *"still rather sad about the other sister"*: a premature infant who died. Other participants who remained friends with former in-laws include Ralph Reed whose friendship with his former brother-in-law, Paul, had great significance later, when he was able to support his nephew at Paul's funeral. Similarly, as discussed earlier (page 153), Abigail Bennett felt a high level of attachment to her former sister-in-law.

Only one participant, Adrian Grey, re-married after a spouse died. Adrian and Robert Grey independently highlight the significance of support given by Robert to Adrian during this difficult time when, as Adrian highlights, Robert was there for him:

"[Robert] was incredibly helpful you know. He was obviously concerned. It sort of pained him, like it pained me, and he went out of his way to sort of arrange all sorts of activities that would help me to cope."

Robert also encouraged Adrian to move forward by engaging him in activities he knew Adrian enjoyed, thus rekindling their relationship. However, Robert's perception that Adrian no longer needed him once he re-married is viewed as the natural order of things, and Adrian values Robert supporting him to move on, as he explains:

"When eventually, couple of years later, I actually got married again, Robert was very supportive [...] very, very, positive, very encouraging [...] it was actually delightful, and those were probably the most important things that he was able to do for me."

Adrian draws attention to the relationship between support and need when he considers how: *"some people won't have had that type of experience, and they may have known err siblings in a more distant way."* Adrian's recollection that Robert responded *"well we enjoy your company, we enjoy being with you"* when he expressed his gratitude, promotes the notion, discussed throughout Chapter Eight (see pages 189-190), that support evolves into companionship, rediscovering sibling relationships, and is about reciprocating.

A further theme running through most participants' narratives is how interconnected their relationships with their siblings and parents were. They recall that helping to support parents during their later years, and supporting each other when parents die, are biographical disruptions that siblings expect to share emotionally and practically. Although siblings are important supportive relationships prior to and following parental loss, there is diversity in how support exchange manifests itself. For instance, participants who consider caring for parents to be shared with their siblings at the time, or in a turn-taking manner, recall it bringing them together. For example, Abigail Bennett provided more care to their mother as she lived nearby at the time and wanted to reciprocate help received from her mother earlier in life. Mark subsequently took on a greater role in supporting their widower father as Abigail was caring for her spouse by then. Mark's move closer to their father brought him nearer to

Abigail and they met frequently when visiting him. Mark's move ultimately facilitated their current daily contact (Chapter Six, page 141). Supporting their father brought the Bennett siblings closer together emotionally and, after he died, they became closer still.

Another form of mutual support is described by the Silver brothers who shared decisions about their mother's care. Although Richard did not live nearby, his visits increased in frequency as their mother became infirm. Gareth is grateful that Richard helped him negotiate with their mother over her future care. He recalls:

"My brother came down and he and I talked it through with her, and got her into a nursing home, which worked very well and [...] I very much appreciated his support [...] it was very much a case of co-operation."

Gareth also explains that after the "traumatic experience" of their father dying, Richard shared their father's assets although he could have claimed the whole estate. Gareth recalls Richard saying "absolutely no way [...] We split it up as it would normally be split." This supports the idea that where sibling relationships are perceived as equitable, they expect to share parents' care and assets equally.

Despite such expectations, equal sharing of parental care is not achievable for everyone. This is because when it is not practical to share caring for a parent between several siblings, it can become one sibling's responsibility or be divided unequally. The sibling with more responsibility tends to live nearer to their parent(s), or be able to have their parent(s) live with them. The White siblings' narratives reveal that inequitable care for a parent, even when it arises voluntarily, can create tensions. Anita White, who was her mother's main carer for thirteen years, feels that tension is an inevitable part of looking after an ageing

parent for so long. However, Elizabeth explains that Anita volunteered to *“take on mum”* and promised never to put her into a home, which made using care homes for respite difficult to negotiate. It also makes it difficult for everyone to provide equal support because visiting a parent does not equate to caring for them. Thus, whilst Elizabeth recalls her, Doris and Anthony’s visits being about giving Anita a break, Anita perceives them as her siblings coming to stay. Also, the period over which Anita cared for their mother was far longer than anticipated, Anthony was away sometimes, and all three sisters experienced marital breakup. Furthermore, if a parent only needs/prefers one person’s care, equitable division of care may not be feasible.

In terms of how sibling relationships are affected by their parents dying, participants reveal that sibling support exchange is different when a first parent dies, compared to when a second parent dies, and also influenced by when their parents died. When a first parent dies, support is directed towards their other grieving parent. If this happens prematurely as it did for the Coal, Grey, Reed, and Peacock siblings, each sibling’s experience of this loss is different. Losing fathers prematurely results in brothers perceiving themselves as the *“head of the household”* and responsible for providing for widowed mothers. When a first parent dies at an older age, concerns are directed towards how their bereaved parent will cope. Mutual concern is facilitated because siblings are at later stages in life themselves, in established careers or early retirement. As discussed above, the Bennett siblings’ lives converged when their mother died in old age but, because the Grey brothers’ mother died at around the time they left home, her death marked the start of their lives diverging.

Losing a second parent elicits support exchange *between* siblings. Eric Brown recalls high levels of emotional support exchange within his sibling group when their mother died and his sister Diana recalls practical support too noting: *“we sorted me mother’s funeral out, me, Eric and Felicity.”* The Green sisters describe clinging together, as Anthea notes: *“When dad died we held each other; we said “oh we’re orphans.””* Although most participants feel

that losing both parents drew them closer some, like Rebecca Reed, recall: *“the lynch pin went and so we all drifted our own ways.”* Later in life, the Reed siblings established relationships that were no longer mediated via a parent.

Most participants describe the thought of losing a sibling as an unimaginable fear. The Black siblings have already lost two brothers, which elicited intense support and empathy. Belinda notes: *“knowing how each other was feeling [was important] so we could share that feeling with each other.”* The Black siblings’ emotive accounts of the loss of their youngest brother in childhood, demonstrates the reciprocal nature of emotional support at the time. Carl recalls they were: *“all terribly concerned and very worried about Alison, being a twin, and how did we look after her”* and the realisation that *“she was concerned for the rest of us [...] We were desperately trying to look after her, and she was trying to look after us.”* This demonstrates reciprocal support between siblings widely spaced in age, even when the youngest is a child. The loss of a second, middle-aged brother, is described by Frank Black as *“traumatic”*, and Evie as *“the worse loss of our lives.”* This second sibling loss, coming at a later time in the life-course, caused feelings of vulnerability to surface. Denise recalls the whole sibling group coming together to comfort each other: *“by then we’d lost our parents and [...] although we’d got our lovely supportive husbands/wives, there was a need for all of us to be together.”* The Black siblings’ need to be together during difficult times relates to experiencing safety, security and comfort from being raised together within a large family. Denise’s comments about that need are representative:

“There was kind of a feeling of vulnerability amongst us and [...] we all sort of went home [...] where my parents used to live and my two brothers still live now. We needed to be together. We needed to actually see and be with each other at that time.”

Participants from other sibling groups who lost a sibling prematurely did not talk much about sibling loss, although their deceased sibling was present in their narratives. For example, the Grey brothers' memories of their younger brother are embedded within their narratives and, when they talk about their childhood, they refer to the three of them together. The White siblings all described their late sister as detached from the rest of them, although her death reinforced the sense of solidarity between them. Interestingly, once Annabelle knew she was dying, she reached out to each of them but, despite attempting to draw them closer, *"she could not quite overcome the emotional distance she had conspired to create."* (Anthony White). The White siblings, like most participants, report feeling closer to their living siblings as they get older so, whether recalling being less close to siblings who died prematurely reflects that the opportunity to draw closer in later life has been denied, is a consideration.

As discussed above, *support* exchange ebbs and flows across the life-course, often beginning with small acts of kindness in childhood and rising to the fore during adulthood in response to life-course events. It is also evident that siblings are needed to celebrate things with, as advisors in parenting matters, as well as someone who can comfort and share understanding over the loss of parents.

The combined narratives of siblings from the same sibling groups, suggest that support over the life-course can be characterised in three ways. First, support exchange is *embedded* within some sibling groups. For example, the Black, the Brown and the Green siblings have a history of sharing emotions, experiences, and practical help with siblings. For them, support is always available because *"nobody's very far away"* (Felicity Brown); reciprocal: *"I know it's there anytime, twenty-four hours, and they know, obviously, that I'm 'ere as well"*, (Eric Brown); and long-term: *"we've always helped one another"* (Diana Black). Moreover, siblings are often chosen as *"the first"* ones who are needed (Anthea Green), and those

with many siblings are able to “*call any one of them*” (Belinda Black). These siblings continuously share emotions and trust, began protecting and comforting each other from a young age, and are secure in the knowledge that “*any day I want the support, it’s out there in anything. Whether it’s a time for grief, or a time for joy...*” (Eric Brown).

Second, some sibling groups describe support as *episodic*, arising in response to changing circumstances. For example, although earlier in life the Bennett, Silver, and White siblings compensated for difficulties with other family relationships, acted as important companions, and exchanged support in the form of comfort, their lives diverged at various points and to varying degrees. Furthermore, some female participants from these sibling groups pursued careers and motherhood simultaneously, and so did not raise their children with their sisters. These participants have also called on other relationships when siblings were unavailable due to geographical dispersion e.g. Len Peacock. In addition, support during a crisis is a feature of these participants’ sibling relationships. For example, Elizabeth White received support when she divorced, and Anthony White came to the assistance of his sister Doris and her family when Doris’s granddaughter was involved in an accident. However, in later life, changes have occurred and some of these participants now exchange regular support with their siblings and/or are preferred sources of support.

Third, some participants did not view support from siblings as a normative function of sibling relationships earlier but, in later life, consider support to be *situation specific*. These participants did not elevate sibling support above support from friends and received support from friends, cousins, and other family members earlier in life. Thus, some members of the Coal, Reed and Scarlett sibling groups do not describe mutual support during childhood because they spent little time together. Sometimes, parents caused division and some of these participants have gone for long periods of time without exchanging support because,

as discussed earlier in this chapter (page 224), their family culture promotes independence from siblings. However, as discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 166-170), attitudes can shift in later life, and perceptions about a sibling's role in support can widen, particularly in response to the loss of other key relationships.

9.3 Patterns of contact and emotional closeness across the life-course

In this section I draw attention to participants' histories of contact and closeness with their siblings in order to understand how life-course events influenced their connectedness. For instance, siblings maintained or, conversely, lost contact for a variety of reasons and, as discussed earlier (pages 234-236), gender appears to play a more significant role in creating differences for these participants during career and parenthood trajectories than it does in later life. In addition to family life-course events, ebb and flow in contact between siblings is influenced by a combination of how dispersed they became, together with expectations about family kin-keeping norms and traditions.

As discussed in Chapter Eight (pages 195-196), whereas the Black and Brown sibling groups followed maternal kin-keeping traditions from the moment each left home, and are continuing these regular gatherings long after their mothers have died, other participants recall kin-keeping traditions being prominent at specific times and dissipating once their mothers died. For example, despite the Reed siblings' family-oriented upbringings spent with aunts, uncles and cousins, they drifted apart once their mother died, only recently reconnecting. Similarly, in the case of the Scarlett siblings, according to Henry "*all the communication with the other members of the family sort of went through [our mother].*" Henry notes that after she died, he and his siblings "*established actual relationships with each other.*"

Some participants who were separated from their siblings earlier in life, do not recall their connections being mediated by their parents. For instance, the White siblings spent large proportions of their childhoods away from each other at boarding schools. They describe “*problematic*” (Doris) and “*neglectful*” (Anthony and Elizabeth) parental relationships, and spending time with each other in the absence of parents, and writing to each other when apart. Other participants who are dispersed, developed similar routines of regularly writing or telephoning which have continued across the life-course in between face-to-face visits. Earlier in life, because telephoning involved a trip “*down to the public phone box*” (Anthea Green), contact was maintained primarily by letter writing. As Anthea recalls: “*She wrote every single solitary week, and I wrote to her every single solitary week.*” Thus, sending letters, postcards and photographs kept siblings connected in between meeting in person. As discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 186-187), better means of staying in contact have improved distant siblings’ ability to stay connected.

Some participants do not perceive kin-keeping as a predominantly female role, perhaps because male and female roles within society are more equal now compared to their parents’ generation or, as is the case for the Grey brothers, the early loss of their mother meant that they became responsible for maintaining their own family relationships. Robert Grey describes Adrian as “*the driving force*” who kept “*the brothers’ thing going.*” However, once they were married, their wives became important in maintaining their connections. Other male participants such as Anthony White and Frank Black, also feel that their wives encouraged them to maintain sibling relationships.

Participants’ descriptions of their sibling relationships across the life-course reveal how, as an important family relationship, siblings’ presence at times of celebration are valued. For example, Adrian Grey highlights proudly that Robert was his best man at his first and second

wedding. Other participants recall occasions where siblings played a formal role, such as bridesmaid, best man, or Godparent. Births of children and later, grandchildren, are events that participants enjoy sharing with siblings, and photographs of celebratory events make them stand out. Hilary and Liam Coal only meet at what Hilary calls “*big events*.” For instance, Liam came to her golden wedding anniversary celebration, visited when her grandson was born, and came again for his christening. Hilary concludes that Liam “*will make the effort for big occasions*”, which suggests that obligatory mechanisms may contribute to sibling relationship maintenance particularly in relation to formal family occasions. However, some participants such as Eric Brown, voluntarily spend time with their siblings who they would like to see more of, despite seeing them regularly:

“to be honest we have that many occasions now where we’ve got nephews and nieces that are getting married or having christenings or whatever, that we are together a lot.”

Participants also highlight that holiday periods were always important family times, particularly Christmas and the summer holidays, and have cherished memories of being with their siblings as children with their parents, and later, gathering together once parents themselves. A typical picture of family gatherings evolving is provided by Abigail Bennett:

“We always, as a family, met every Christmas at my mother’s house. The whole family, and I remember at one stage there was always an extra baby each year. Became a very full house, because they both had children you see.”

Participants who were not proximate to their siblings once adults, such as the Grey brothers and the Green sisters, travelled to stay with each other at Christmas, and siblings who are not in the same country, exchanged cards, gifts, or phone calls and thought of each other,

routines which are all still ongoing. Many participants have a history of going on holiday together as couples or family units and, recently, as sibling groups. Also, participants who are distant from their siblings often combined holiday trips with visiting siblings and still do e.g. David Reed, Sharon Scarlett, Len Peacock. During the period where Robert Grey supported Adrian, the brothers returned to their childhood holiday destination where Robert engaged Adrian in activities that they enjoyed as children.

Although earlier in life, ebb and flow in contact and companionships between siblings occurs, due to geographical distance and life-course transition, periods of lesser contact were not perceived to be problematic for most participants. This is different to later life when, as discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 183-185), barriers to contact are arising for some participants and others regret not considering the long-term effect that moving away would have on their sibling relationships. Furthermore, geographical distances can diminish siblings' role in forms of support which require meeting in person.

Only a few participants describe significant breaks in contact earlier in life. Liam Coal was out of contact with Hilary during his boarding school years, recalling: *"I don't think we ever wrote to each other."* Similarly, during his early working years, Liam notes: *"We didn't have much contact at all really, to say we were only a few miles apart."* Jack Scarlett also feels he had no involvement, holidays or outings with his siblings during childhood and adolescence, recalling: *"the things we did, we did separately."* Jack views his parents as *"fairly anti-social"* because there were no extended family gatherings. Henry corroborates Jack's account, recalling that contact between him and his siblings *"just didn't happen, except you know Christmas cards, at best I'd say."* Henry felt disconnected sometimes and experienced: *"a lot of drifting and travelling away and spending my time out of contact with my parents and anybody else."*

As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 179), the Reed siblings attribute breaks in contact to the effect of marriage. Once married, and despite living only two miles apart, David recalls *“we were lucky if we ever saw Ralph.”* Similarly, during a period when Rebecca lived just twenty miles away, David recalls that he *“didn’t see [Rebecca] for years”* and, later, geographical distance became influential when Rebecca lived abroad. During this time David notes: *“of course that was again loss of contact, apart from the odd phone call or birthday card.”* The significance of geographical distance on contact is further highlighted by Liz Brown, the only Brown sibling who moved away from the area where they were raised. Liz recalls: *“apart from letters and things to parents [...] I didn’t really have an awful lot to do with them.”* Overall though, participants’ narratives reveal that loss of contact, and even loss of interest between siblings, is considered to be out of the ordinary. The White siblings are puzzled by their late sister Annabelle’s aloof attitude, as Anthony explains:

“She never sent birthday cards. She never sent Christmas cards. She was very sort of sloppy on those little things, that actually are quite important bits of mortar in a family of remembering, even if you remember late. She never remembered late. She never bothered.”

Despite ebb and flow in how connected siblings are, most participants emphasise that *emotionally*, their siblings’ importance remains constant. Thus, rather paradoxically, the concept of constancy in the face of change, arises from participants’ narratives (see Chapter Seven, pages 163-164). Participants’ accounts suggest that feelings of attachment result in sibling relationships appearing constant, because interest and emotional closeness remain. However, paradoxically again, participants describe feelings towards siblings intensifying in later life and, as discussed in Chapter Seven, their sibling relationships are taking on new meaning (see page 166). Thus, when considering sibling relationships through a biographical lens, three things become apparent in terms of emotional closeness. First,

there are participants who feel that their sibling relationships have always been close emotionally and find it hard to pinpoint change, although they do report feeling closer currently. Furthermore, if they have more than one sibling, they describe no shifts in sibling alliances. These participants refer to loving their siblings differently and having different siblings for different things. As Evie Black suggests, love can be experienced differently, yet equally: *"You love them all, but some are in a different way, 'coz they're a different person aren't they?"*

Second, there are participants who do identify changes in emotional closeness across the life-course. As discussed earlier in this chapter, one reason for emotional closeness between some participants and their siblings appearing to dip is marriage (see page 234). Moreover, a degree of ambivalence is seen as a normative function of sibling relationships, as illustrated by the accounts of participants who describe shifts in allegiances. For example, Elizabeth White feels emotionally close to her brother Anthony, but being close in age and sharing so many experiences over the life-course means that when viewed in its entirety, her relationship with Doris stands out as she notes affectionately: *"Most of my life Doris has been supreme in my needs and love."* Similarly, although emotionally close to Elizabeth now, Anthony *"cannot deny"* the significance of his earlier relationship with Anita which has facilitated a strong enduring attachment towards her. That some siblings who are extremely close emotionally, such as the Green sisters, mention episodes of conflict in their sibling relationships from time to time demonstrates further that emotional closeness ebbs and flows. Because past conflicts have been resolved, participants tend to remember hurt and regret, and their overwhelming sense of relief once conflict resolves.

Third, the Scarlett siblings' narratives indicate that some siblings who are not close earlier in life can overcome emotional distance, to varying degrees. As discussed earlier, Jack and Karen Scarlett completely overcame the emotional distance created by their upbringing, whereas Henry and Sharon describe more ambivalence in their sibling relationships. For example, Henry contrasts times when he felt "so affectionate" towards Sharon with times when, on reflection, he may have treated her harshly. Similarly, Sharon has experienced opposing feelings of fondness and resentment towards her younger siblings over the life-course. Also, the Scarlett sisters' attempts to draw each other closer at various points in the life-course have not been realised as Jack bears witness to:

"I think my two sisters have been at each other's throats all their lives. Not seriously, they regroup again whenever they get the opportunity. They separate, they are a bit apologetic."

Despite the emotional ebb and flow that some participants have experienced in their sibling relationships over the life-course, most of those who consider their sibling relationships to be constant emotionally are close to their siblings now. Whether this indicates that emotional changes are more difficult to recall than circumstantial or behavioural changes may require further attention.

Another purported influence on emotional closeness between siblings, which lacks consensus within the literature, is *gender*. As discussed in Chapter Eight (pages 211-213), gender appears to be a weak predictor of emotional closeness between siblings in later life. When reflecting on early childhood experiences, participants do not recall feeling differently about their brothers, compared to their sisters. Although the only sister-sister pair in the study appear to be particularly intimate, and Anthea Green characterises her and Carolyn as "*anchors for one another*", they were less close as children and have experienced conflict

as adults. By contrast, the Grey brothers seemed more intimate in the past than they are now, but recall no conflicts. Furthermore, both sets of siblings drew closer when one sibling transitioned into widow/widowerhood. The Grey brothers' relationship became less intimate once Adrian re-married. However, Anthea has remained a widow, and this may be a stronger effect than gender in maintaining high levels of emotional closeness between the Green sisters. This idea gains support from the accounts of the Bennett siblings, a brother-sister pair, who have experienced an intimate, affectionate, open, and trusting relationship across the life-course, despite some ebb and flow in importance when focusing on marriage and/or careers. In addition, their relationship intensified after their spouses died.

Overall, both male and female participants report that emotional closeness intensifies as they get older, and participants of either sex have strong emotional bonds with brothers or sisters. As discussed earlier, participants from larger sibling groups tend to make less distinction between sibling relationships with brothers compared to sisters (see Chapter Eight, 211), and feel emotionally close to all of their siblings irrespective of gender.

In summary, some participants describe their sibling relationships as a constant in their lives, emotionally; constant in terms of communication; and ever present in a supportive sense. That others describe ebb and flow in emotions and/or behaviour (even from within the same sibling group), presents an interesting and complex puzzle which may require further investigation. It may be that participants whose relationships have a firm foundation are more stable emotionally and less liable to disruption over the life-course, whereas those with a weaker foundation are more liable to ebb and flow. However, the situation is further complicated because a small number of participants report emotional distance and not calling on siblings for support as permanent features of their sibling relationship, although some of them have not needed their siblings yet.

9.4 Conclusion

Through participants' biographical narratives, life-course events and transitions which most commonly influence sibling relationships have been identified. The shaping effect of family culture becomes apparent in childhood and continues across the life-course, leading to adaptations and changes in the opportunities or motivation to spend time with siblings. Marriage, parenthood, widowhood, work, retirement, and the modifying effect of geographical proximity, are all apparent. Taking a biographical approach reveals that, for some, family culture leads to a perception that sibling relationships are a constant presence, despite ebb and flow at particular times; whereas others report changes and less interdependency. The influence of the past runs like a thread throughout all the narratives, with themes of ebb and flow, change and adaptation, separation and togetherness, emerging across the life-course.

Family culture also influenced gender expectations, siblings' roles earlier in life, and whether families of origin play a central role in life. Age spacing and gender influenced the nature of time spent together at various points in the life-course because they affected whether siblings entered life-course transitions at similar times. Gender also created differences in siblings' opportunities to share experiences during specific life-course transitions. Marriage has a significant influence on sibling relationships due to the relative compatibility of married couples' family cultures and related events such as changes in geographical proximity. The relative timing of parenthood and/or careers is also influential. Supportive exchange features in most participants' sibling relationships and is perceived as either ever present, or episodic in response to times of difficulty and/or celebration. Although the loss of specific family relationships elicits supportive behaviours earlier in the life-course, sibling support is limited by participants' commitments to other family relationships, particularly children and widowed parents, unlike in later life, which seems to be why divorce, coming earlier in the life-course, elicits less support from siblings compared to widowhood, which comes later.

Some participants report little change in their feelings towards their siblings over the life-course. However, those who recall changes in emotional closeness during middle adulthood years, describe sibling relationships being set aside, rather than feelings reducing. Whilst earlier life circumstances such as geographical distance, marriage, careers and parenthood, reduce the importance of siblings, altering those circumstances increases importance e.g. moving nearer, widowhood, retirement. Despite ebb and flow across the life-course, biographical accounts reveal just how present siblings are in participants' current lives. In Chapter Ten, I draw together the various threads of this thesis and discuss the implications of my findings about late life sibling relationships.

Chapter Ten: Discussion and Conclusion

10.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I present a synthesis of my study findings and relevant literature. As I explained in Chapter One, my interest in older adults' sibling relationships arose from curiosity and a desire to enhance understanding about a relationship that, as I highlighted in Chapters Two and Three, is less researched than other family relationships. In Chapters Four and Five, I explained my rationale for exploring sibling relationships from more than one perspective in order to discover meaning. In Chapters Six to Nine, I presented my findings drawing on analyses of participants' current experiences and biographies. In addition to discussing these findings further here, I conclude this final chapter of my thesis by considering areas for further research, summarising how my findings contribute to existing knowledge, policy and practice, and by reflecting on the approach I have taken and its limitations.

In conducting this study, it was a privilege to listen to, be guided by, and interpret participants' reflections of their lived experiences of being and having siblings. I found sibling relationships to be diverse, complex, adaptable, puzzling and significant. The discussion which follows is framed by my four research questions:

Research Question One: What is the nature of older people's sibling relationships in later life? What do siblings in late life do with, and for, one another?

Research Question Two: What have older people's sibling relationships been like over the life-course? What has influenced these relationships? What changes have occurred over the life-course?

Research Question Three: In what ways do siblings re-negotiate their relationships over the life-course and in later life? What instigates these re-negotiations and how do they go about it?

Research Question Four: In what ways has gender impacted on sibling relationships over the life-course and now, in later life?

10.1 Sibling relationships in later life

My findings answer my first research question by demonstrating that sibling relationships in later life are important, complex and nuanced, and that siblings are providers of companionship and support, significant family relationships and special friendships. Below, I revisit the range of practical and emotional support that participants and their siblings exchange, and consider their responsiveness to life-course transitions such as widowhood, and the role of reciprocity. I discuss how these findings might be of interest to policy makers, stakeholders, and health and social care professionals. I note that the longevity of sibling relationships promotes comfort and trust, and how in later life, siblings are valued for the enjoyment that they provide, their everyday interactions, and for reminiscing with. Finally, I highlight how technological advances have contributed to connecting siblings although, for some, barriers to face-to-face contact inhibit some forms of support exchange, and need addressing.

The findings I presented in Chapter Seven, corroborate Gold's (1987) findings that older adults' sibling relationships are mainly positive, are important because of their supportive potential, and are needed more in later life. I established that participants and their siblings benefitted from socialising, exchanging routine help, and responding to adversity. However, in Chapter Nine, I offered an explanation for my finding which challenged the suggestion

that siblings mainly provide emotional support (Avioli, 1989; Cicirelli, 1995). Namely, multiple accounts from within sibling groups reveal that practical support was in fact less recognised than emotional support when it became routine. In addition, not living near to siblings limits practical support exchange, but not emotional support.

Viewing siblings as special friends is a reason that some participants turn to their siblings first for assistance (Chapter Seven, page 159). This backs Knipscheer and van Tilburg's (2013) finding that siblings are greater providers of support in later life than age peers. That some participants viewed their siblings as dependable relationships, with a long history of comforting and supporting, also challenges the view that siblings primarily provide help in a crisis (von Volkom, 2006). My finding that sibling support arose in response to physical illness and widowhood (see Chapter Eight, pages 202-210), and contributes to siblings drawing closer in later life, is consistent with a lot of the literature (e.g. O'Bryant, 1988; Connidis, 1992; White, 2001; Campbell et al., 1999; Voorpostel et al., 2012; Knipscheer and Van Tilburg, 2013; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2016). However, as highlighted in Chapter Eight (pages 207-209), I found sibling support in response to widowhood less transient than reported by Guiaux et al. (2007), because siblings alleviated the loneliness experienced by those who cared for their spouse *before* their spouse died. I also found that sibling support was re-negotiated once participants transitioned from carer to widow/widower, changing from comfort to help with re-establishing social interests. Similarly, emotional support and empathy were common responses to physical illness, although they did combine with practical support. In Chapter Eight (page 202), I noted that serious illness elicited increased contact, concern and comfort, whereas chronic long-term illness elicited empathy and adjustments.

From a life-course perspective, retirement made siblings more available to provide socio-emotional support following widowhood than adult children, although intergenerational co-operation was also evident. As discussed in Chapter Seven (page 174), retirement also

reduced the emotional distance created during career years, allowing participants time to reflect on, and appreciate the value of, a relationship originating in childhood. This supports Gold's (1987) and Chambers et al's. (2009) findings that adults recognise the importance of sibling relationships in old age, contact them more and draw closer to them, something made possible because they retire at similar times (Dorfman, 2002). However, I noted that the commonly expressed view in the literature that the peer-like nature of sibling relationships makes them likely to experience life-transitions at similar times (Van Volkom, 2006), does not hold true for everyone. Wide age spacing creates differences in the relative timing of life-course transitions, including retirement and, traditionally, people have retired at different ages based on occupation and gender.

As Avioli (1989) suggests, I found that sibling support exchange was influenced by reciprocation which is balanced over time, although not necessarily like-for-like. In addition, participants gained satisfaction and benefitted from mutual companionship when paying back support from their siblings. This supports findings that older adults gain pleasure from family relationships (Chambers et al., 2009), and that the absence of strong sibling relationships can lead to loneliness (Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2016). However, as discussed in Chapter Eight (page 198), my findings do not support Avioli's (1989) suggestion that reciprocation is *always expected*. Participants gained satisfaction from helping and, if support became routine, it was not perceived as support, thus negating the need to return it. This supports Barnes's (2012) view that sibling support exchange needs understanding in historical and cultural, as well as current, context.

Consistent with the view that perceived sibling support is important (Lam and Power, 1991; White and Riedmann, 1992), I found that participants were confident about the availability of sibling support. However, unlike Gold (1989), I did not find participants reluctant to utilise sibling support for fear of dependency, although some expressed concern about their

diminishing supportive contributions due to ill-health, which induced feelings of useless and disappointment. This backs Thompson's (2016) call to: guard against viewing dependent older adults as useless; help them to reciprocate support; and allow for less balanced reciprocation; as does my finding that diminishing input was not viewed unfavourably by their siblings. Whilst Thompson (2016) calls for social work professionals to raise the profile of reciprocity on research and practice agendas, Barnes (2012) identified that adults caring for siblings at home turned to family members for respite and advice. Furthermore, I found that participants were well placed to understand each of their siblings' needs (Chapter Eight, pages 206-208). Moreover, those who referred to diminishing contribution do provide emotional support and companionship and need supporting in their endeavour to continue to do so. How this can best be facilitated is an important consideration for future research (see page 281).

Like Connidis (1992), I found the impact of marriage on sibling relationships to be mainly positive, and I provide further insight into the effect of *long-term* marriage. Due to the longevity of most participants' marriages, relationships with married siblings were experienced as relationships with, or between, couples. As explained in Chapter Seven (page 177), if family cultures encouraged in-laws to be adopted into sibling groups, marriage extended them and led to favourable relationships with married siblings. In comparison, family cultures which promoted independence led to married siblings going their separate ways. However, even those who embraced their siblings-in-law viewed their sibling relationships reverting to being "just siblings" following widowhood, positively.

In Chapter Seven (pages 157-159), I highlighted that participants valued siblings as family relationships with whom they have invested interests. Like Johnson (1999), I demonstrated that participants connect to extended family networks via their siblings, emphasised in later

life, due to reductions, through loss, in their social networks. As sibling relationships assume life-long importance in cultures where they are obligatory (Cicirelli, 1995), there is merit in considering whether the view that sibling relationships in Western societies are mainly voluntary (Van Volkom, 2006), is consistent with my finding that obligatory influences ensure that they do not dissolve when circumstances change (Chapter Seven, page 162), and Allan's (1996) view that family context facilitates a mutual sense of responsibility.

As Gold (1987) reports, I found that mellowing in later life contributed to participants valuing their siblings more and, in addition, to re-negotiating their sibling relationships by downplaying differences that formerly created tensions (Chapter Seven, page 169). Although reminiscing and life-review are considered to be beneficial to older adults' sibling relationships (Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987), my findings challenge the assumption that reminiscing is important to everyone for two reasons. First, shared experiences and reminiscing varied in quality. As discussed in Chapter Eight (pages 191-192), participants distinguished between reminiscing which allowed memories to surface, and analytical reminiscing which, although cathartic, could be irritating. Gold (1987) suggests that reminiscing with siblings compares favourably to reminiscing alone about painful experiences. However, for some participants the reverse applied, because reminiscing with siblings was not about rediscovering happy memories. Second, many participants focused more on enjoying every day talk with their siblings (see Chapter Eight, pages 193-194).

A multi-perspective approach provided detail about interdependency within sibling groups, and provided a detailed picture of how modern means of communication enabled news to be shared quickly amongst siblings. However, I highlighted in Chapter Seven (pages 186-187) that although technological advances mean that keeping in touch is instantaneous, inexpensive, and convenient, there is no substitute for getting together in person.

Participants who are the oldest siblings in their groups, mentioned barriers to face-to-face contact arising from health problems and financial restrictions, which need addressing. My findings that participants who moved nearer to their siblings in later life experienced increased closeness, contact, and support, confirm those of Ross and Milgram (1982) and Lee et al. (1990). In addition, participants benefited (as did those who remained living near to siblings) from increased socialisation and support (see Chapter Eight, pages 202-204). Although moving nearer to a sibling in later life challenges the notion that it is better to age in place, ageing in place is about more than remaining in familiar territory, because the availability of social networks and resources are influential (Wiles et al., 2012). Participants who moved nearer to siblings in later life have all returned to the area where they were raised so, the benefit of moving nearer to siblings who live in unfamiliar areas needs exploring, particularly as a few participants who considered moving nearer to siblings doubted if they could adjust.

I found that participants who viewed living with siblings favourably had observed this working successfully within their family, and focussed on potential socio-emotional gain and minor practical support exchange. Conversely, participants who believed that if they or their siblings were unable to live independently the level of need would be too burdensome for a sibling, had past experience of caring for ageing relatives. These viewpoints distinguish between siblings mutually supporting each other, which was seen as beneficial, and *care-giving* which might supersede participants' ability to support effectively. Furthermore, family culture influenced whether living with a sibling in later life seemed acceptable, based on feelings of belonging, or conversely feelings of independence and resilience. This supports Barnes (2012) who finds family culture a determinant of older adults' sense of responsibility towards siblings and, therefore, how willing or not they are to care for a sibling. As discussed in Chapter Eight (pages 217-218) my findings, those of Barnes (2012) and also of Borland (1987), suggest that living with siblings in later life might combat loneliness and facilitate some forms of support exchange.

Participants' accounts provided important pointers that could inform the development of policies aimed at facilitating sibling support in later life. Participants highlight that some older adults will need other family members or practitioners to be involved in order to help siblings to care. Disseminating a key message that siblings can, and do, play vital support roles in later life is crucial in order to better inform the development of health and social care policies and practices. For example, Age UK's recent report 'Why call it care when nobody cares?' (AgeUK, 2018) identified that one in seven older adults experience unmet need and that the cost of delayed discharge from hospital for those who lack social support at home is approaching £300 million per year. Age UK call upon the government to increase social care funding to address the root causes of ill-health and loss of independence. However, in the 'Care and support of older people – an international review' (Centre for Policy on Ageing, 2014) attention is drawn to the fact that older adults receive support predominantly from family and friends. My participants' accounts provide evidence of the importance of family members and professionals working together, to help siblings with care needs to maintain their independence for longer.

Furthermore, Namkung et al. (2017) report that care-giving is less detrimental to the well-being of sibling care-givers of all ages, compared to spousal or parental care-givers. I found that helping a sibling in later life can be a positive emotional experience, which suggests there is considerable value in highlighting to health and social care practitioners the potentially crucial role that older siblings play in support and care. Moreover, the complexities associated with sibling systems also highlights that practitioners should be aware of the help and support that siblings might need in order to manage informal and shared care effectively.

Health professionals in the UK are inclined to recognise sibling care-givers as a legitimate relationship. Whilst sibling support exchange over the life-course is a normative function of sibling relationships (Barnes, 2012) some types of sibling support are easier to achieve when siblings live in close geographical proximity. This challenges policy makers to include

siblings in policy developments associated with care 'at a distance'. Moreover, there is more to do in housing policy and practice which includes considering the potential value of siblings living close together, or in intergenerational groups. Housing needs and living arrangements of older adults are highlighted in a number of recent policy documents including the White paper 'Caring for our future' (HM Government, 2012). Thus, greater creativity in developing housing options that recognise the role of siblings needs further exploration. Participants in my study highlighted potential family conflict surrounding inheritance of property when siblings live together and one predeceases the other(s). This finding suggests the importance of clear guidance, readily available, which details the rights of the sibling(s) who remain in the property.

10.2 Sibling Relationships over the Life-Course

To answer my second research question, this section discusses the influence of family culture, parental expectations, sibling group structure, societal norms, life-course needs, and geographical dispersal. I discuss how family culture and structure influences participants' shared experience with, and attachment to, their siblings. Contact, emotional closeness, and support, which ebb and flow over the life-course in response to transitions such as marriage, parenthood, retirement and widowhood, are highlighted. I also discuss how sibling support exchange is influenced by availability, commitments to other family members, reciprocity, and show how obligatory and voluntary aspects of sibling relationships contribute to re-negotiation over the life-course.

Despite Johnson (1976) advocating the use of biographical approaches, with the exception of Barnes (2012), little research attention is given to exploring how older adults' lived experiences of their sibling relationships across the life-course contribute to their current nature. As I highlighted in Chapter Nine, participants' sibling relationship histories are

diverse, complex, fascinating and illuminating, and many participants' siblings were preferred relationships at various times in the life-course: to celebrate with, to support, and to fulfil family obligations. In Chapter Nine (pages 221-229), I reported that childhood sibling relationships lay the foundations for the future. Although Merz and De Jong Gierveld (2016) argue that sibling relationships are unique from a life-course perspective because they start out together in a shared parental home and experience comparable socialisation, I found that parents alone were not the *“seedbed for support exchanges between family members throughout life”* that Merz and De Jong Gierveld (2014: 535) suggest. Rather, parents' role in promoting family values were enriched by input from other family members, by adhering to family traditions, and influenced by prevailing societal norms. This supports Cicirelli's (1995) call to use a broader perspective when studying sibling relationships within the context of their family. Furthermore, I found that participants raised apart from their siblings developed a strong sense of belonging to their sibling group and were able to foster and maintain their family values at a distance. The importance of participants' sibling relationships was influenced by more than their lived experience of being and having siblings, because the value that participants' parents placed on their own sibling relationships influenced whether participants passed their family traditions on to younger family members. This supports Donley and Likins' (2010) finding that family culture is influential over the generations because parents' sibling relationship quality influences their children's sibling relationships. Participants whose family culture promoted belonging, revealed how siblings act as conduits between past, present, and younger generations. Multiple narratives revealed the degree to which family culture promoted sharing, co-operating and belonging to sibling groups, rather than becoming independent of them. Like Gold (1987), I found that participants valued their siblings because of their family history, biological heritage, and shared family connections.

As also reported in Chapter Nine (pages 224-228), sibling group structure modified the *nature* and *amount* of time participants spent with their childhood siblings. My findings do

not support Bank and Kahn's (1997) suggestion that closely spaced siblings experience more intense attachment and greater interdependency across the life-course because the life-course milestones of participants spaced closely in age do not necessarily coincide and wide age spacing does not preclude interdependency. Although close age spacing resulted in some participants becoming childhood companions, strong enduring attachments arose between siblings who spent time alone together whilst one helped to raise the other (see Chapter Nine, page 226). As wide age spacing between siblings can result from parental separation and reconciliation, pregnancy loss, infertility, as well as choice, the significance of this type of sibling relationship should not be consigned to the past.

I also reported that some participants experienced disruption in their family lives and showed how their unique experiences during the War and post-War austerity period led to special bonds developing between siblings who shared them (see Chapter Nine, page 222). Other disruptions in family life were also relevant to contemporary family life (e.g. health or educational reasons, parental divorce). The effects of disruptions which led to participants being separated from their siblings during childhood, were influenced by the degree of attachment prior to separation, and whether parents intended separation to promote independence.

I contributed further understanding about the ebb and flow in sibling relationships over the life-course reported by White, (2001) noting in Chapter Nine (pages 228-237), that the divergence which occurred when participants entered different life-course transitions to their siblings was due to the influence of family culture, relative age, gender, and life-course needs. Divergence during childhood was attributed to parents encouraging the development of different interests or separating siblings; childhood illness; or the grammar school system segregating siblings based on academic ability. During adolescence/early adulthood divergence was due to: developing a sense of self/establishing independence; and prioritising friendships or romantic partnerships. Although feelings towards siblings remained constant, motivation and opportunity to spend time with them altered. Like

Blauboer (2010) reports, participants' sibling relationships changed when they left home and separated. However, I found diversity in the timing of leaving home, because those whose family culture promoted belonging left home later. Then, most participants' sibling relationships regained meaning if they entered the same life-course transition as their siblings, which was why participants felt in "*different spaces*" to their siblings sometimes, yet "*blended*" again at others.

Multiple accounts from within sibling groups revealed that family traditions are the mortar that cements sibling connections. Family events were foregrounded because the ebb and flow described in participants' sibling relationships arose mainly in response to changes in family life-course trajectories such as widowhood in later life, and marriage and parental loss/assistance earlier in life. I support the finding that marriage mostly affects sibling relationships favourably (Connidis, 1992). As noted in Chapter Seven (pages 176-179), participants' sibling relationships were often experienced as relationships with or between couples because sustained marriages were common; and the relative compatibility of married siblings and their spouses' family cultures was important. As others report (e.g. Allan, 1977; Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis 1992), I found that when marital partners created tension, contact between siblings reduced but not emotional closeness, and participants adeptly navigated their way around tensions in order to avoid sibling conflict.

In Chapter Nine (pages 238-241), I shed light on the puzzle highlighted in the literature that although individuals are emotionally closer to divorced than married siblings (Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973; O'Bryant 1988; Connidis, 1989), and important for divorcees who lack other family support (Bedford and Avioli, 2001), divorce does not elicit support from siblings (Voorpostel et al., 2012), nor relationship breakup in a wider sense (Spitze and Trent, 2018). I found that the relative timing of divorce, coming earlier in the life-course than widowhood,

meant that parents were available to support divorcees, particularly those with children. If participants divorced whilst their siblings were supporting other family members, support to children and ageing parents was prioritised, which Knipscheer and van Tilburg (2013) attribute to greater priority being given to spouses, parents and children, out of a greater sense of obligation towards them. My findings offer further explanation because the need for support following divorce seemed less recognised amongst my participants due to the transient nature of divorce; divorce being perceived as a choice; lack of understanding about the emotional impact of divorce as it was uncommon; and divorce being stigmatised in some sibling groups. These findings support Voorpostel et al. (2012) who suggest that willingness to give support, and perceived accountability for the circumstances that lead to support being needed, might be linked. Whether divorce will elicit sibling support amongst future sibling groups for whom it is more commonplace and socially acceptable, is a question to be raised. In addition, unlike widowhood, divorce can divide loyalties when, as most participants were, individuals desire to remain on amicable terms with former in-laws because they are fond of them and they wish to maintain niece and nephew relationships.

My findings highlight that participants expected to divide support to ageing parents with their siblings, to support each other when parents died, and divide parent's assets fairly, because parents brought them up to view themselves as equal. As discussed in Chapter Nine (pages 242-244), siblings who helped a parent between them valued each other's input, whereas unequal support created tension. Although supporting an ageing parent together is desirable, participants' lived experiences suggest that this can be inhibited by geographical dispersal, other family commitments, or parental choice. I also found that the premature death of a father resulted in brothers supporting widowed mothers, whereas brothers and sisters provided emotional support to fathers when mothers died prematurely. When a parent died in old age, participants, who were in later life-phases themselves by then, shared concern with their siblings about a surviving parent's ability to live alone, and

negotiated this parent's care together. Most siblings exchanged emotional and practical support when their second parent died, and drew closer, with the exception of two sibling groups who temporarily drifted apart.

Like Gold (1987), I found that participants were concerned about sibling loss (Chapter Seven, pages 172-173) which some had experienced already. Those who feel a strong sense of belonging to their sibling group, highlight sibling loss as a particularly supportive time. Because participants have drawn closer to their siblings in later life it seems likely that the impact of losing a sibling in late life would be greater, in fitting with participants' fears about their siblings dying. The impact of sibling loss in later life was raised during recruitment and may merit investigation.

Although Blauboer (2010) contests that societies are moving towards more dispersed families, as highlighted in Chapter Six, most sibling groups in this study are dispersed. Those participants who established means of remaining connected to distant siblings early in life consider travelling and staying with distant family members normative. Despite most participants experiencing maternal kin-keeping traditions such as their mothers organising regular family gatherings, only the largest families continued them once their mothers died because they are mainly proximate. Whilst means of contacting distant siblings have improved and diversified over participants' lives it seems that geographical distance influences whether family gatherings are observed and that factors which alter the availability of time influence contact between participants and their siblings. Although periods of low contact were not problematic earlier in life due to shared understanding about other commitments they were in later life (Chapter Seven, pages 183-185).

My finding, discussed in Chapter Seven (pages 167-168), that participants who were not emotionally close to their siblings earlier in life became so during adulthood, and that their closeness has intensified in later life, refutes the suggestion that this seems unlikely (see

Connidis, 1989, 1994). However, my finding corroborates Barnes's (2012) finding that older adults who were not emotionally close to their siblings in the past willingly became their care-giver. Although I found some participants who only became closer to their siblings in adulthood to be less at ease with them than those who report close sibling relationships from the start. This emphasises the importance of understanding how past biography shapes current relationships and contributes to their re-negotiation over the life-course.

My research findings indicate that in order to understand sibling care-givers' needs, policy makers and practitioners need to consider the historical context of sibling relationships. Childhood experiences, family culture, and the formation sibling bonds are of special significance across the life-course as they are likely to influence and shape the kinds of support roles that siblings take on for those brothers and sisters who need support. Health and social care practitioners also need to be aware that conflict may exist within sibling systems. My findings, and those of Gold (1987), demonstrate that conflicted sibling relationships are a source of deep regret in later life, and deprive older adults of a vital source of companionship and support if problems are not resolved, something which is not always appreciated during middle adulthood years. However, as discussed next, sibling relationships can be re-negotiated over the life-course in response to changing need.

10.3 Negotiating Sibling Relationships

My third research question focusses on how sibling relationships are re-negotiated over the life-course. Here, I discuss ways in which participants' childhood sibling relationships were influenced by parental expectations, and consider how their sibling relationships have continued to adapt during adulthood in response to life-course events. Finally, I attend to the different ways in which participants negotiated factors which affected their interaction with siblings in later life.

My finding in Chapter Nine (pages 222-224) that family culture and parental expectations influence how siblings related, adapted, and responded to each other, shares some common ground with Merz and De Jong Gierveld (2016) who find positive childhood family relationships to be associated with lower levels of loneliness amongst older widowed adults. I found that siblings' roles within their sibling group, negotiated during childhood, remained significant. For instance, siblings who experienced surrogate parent-child relationships, successfully negotiated this type of relationship, developing enduring attachments (Chapter Nine, pages 226-227). Similarly, those who experienced their age-peer siblings as playmates during early childhood often re-negotiated their relationships in response to separation or divergence in interests or friendships (Chapter Nine, page 226). Accounts which highlight the fluidity of sibling relationships supports Connidis's (2007) finding that they are re-negotiated over the life-course. In Chapter Nine (page 228), I noted that some sibling groups accommodated changes early in life such as siblings being born. I also noted variation in how adeptly sibling relationships were re-negotiated over the life-course, based on parental influence. Likewise, Sutor and Pillemer (2007) and Sutor et al. (2006) report that parental treatment influences closeness and support between siblings. I found that fair parental treatment promoted co-operation, whereas unfair treatment inhibited some participants' ability to re-negotiate their sibling relationships.

Whilst most participants successfully adapted to changes in their sibling relationships when they married, I found that sibling relationships can be re-negotiated in response to tensions created by siblings-in-law over a long period of time (see Chapter Seven, pages 179-178). Although participants who experience long-term sensitivity in their in-law relationships feel less relaxed in their sibling's company, the strategies that they employ to avoid conflict, such as seeing their sibling alone, take on renewed significance in later life, due to their desire to remain friends with their siblings to the end (see Chapter Seven, page 179). My findings corroborate Connidis (1992) who reports that siblings regain importance in the absence or reversal of marriage. Although some participants recall emotional closeness

lessening during marriage and parenthood, and increasing thereafter, resembling the pattern described in the literature (Bedford, 1989; Gold, 1987; Lee et al., 1990; Neyer, 2002), participants who remained connected to their sibling group held more consistent feelings towards them. Like others (e.g. White, 2001; Knipscheer and van Tilburg, 2013; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2014), I found that sibling relationships were re-negotiated in order to compensate for the loss of important relationships, particularly spouses (Chapter Eight, pages 206-209) and long-term friendships. Empathy and understanding came to the fore (Chapter Seven, pages 181-182) intensifying emotional closeness even for those who were already close. This supports Smith's (2002) finding that older adults increasingly prefer emotional support from peers. Because bereavement created uncertainty about the future, participants found comfort in their enduring sibling relationships. Through re-negotiating their relationships to compensate for major losses, participants' siblings were re-established as important companions whose role in encouraging widowed participants to re-establish a social life, for instance, was significant (see Chapter Eight, pages 207-209).

I found too that sibling relationships were re-negotiated when retirement (Chapter Seven, pages 174-175), created opportunities for siblings to come together and reflect on their desire to remain on an amicable footing. This supports research which describes mellowing in later life (Gold, 1987; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2014). My findings demonstrated that mellowing results in tolerance of differences and steering clear of divisive subjects in order to avoid conflict. That participants felt less inclined to argue and more inclined to enjoy their siblings' company supports the notion that agency is important (Hutchinson, 2007). Participants elected to be kinder to their siblings or to use strategies to minimise differences (Chapter Seven, pages 167-168).

As mentioned above (page 271) there was a rising awareness amongst some participants that they might outlive their siblings, even when all sibling group members were in good health. This highlights the irreplaceable nature of sibling relationships. Although I found

support for Merz and De Jong Gierveld (2014) who attribute increased feelings of closeness towards siblings to widowhood, and Gold (1987) who attributes fear of sibling loss to illness in later life triggering awareness of the nearness of death, I found greater complexity. Sibling relationships were re-negotiated in a social sense, as well as an emotional sense, in response to changes in social networks and changes in some siblings' physical abilities. I found, like Connidis (2007), that sibling relationships were re-negotiated in order to account for inequality. In her study, adjustments were made in activities that siblings engaged in together to allow for financial inequity, whereas in mine they allowed for changes in physical ability (Chapter Seven, page 164).

Despite disruptions to sibling relationships, a life-course perspective identified that they are important even when they wane, because they maintain their mutual interest so that when circumstances allow, or needs arise, they are re-negotiated seamlessly (see Chapter Seven, page 165). As Bank (1995) noted, individuals rarely attempt to dissolve sibling relationships. Whilst biographical accounts reveal that siblings are expected to fulfil specific obligations, how obligatory processes contribute to maintaining sibling relationships during periods of lower priority, receives little attention in Western societies, although Allan (2008) notes that feeling responsible towards siblings explains why they continue in the face of conflict.

That sibling relationships were re-negotiated and described as changeable, presented a paradox because many participants also described their siblings as a constant presence in their lives. Although biographical reflections revealed that participants' sibling relationships are stable compared to friendships which may drift, stability is rarely referred to in sibling literature. Accounts from within sibling groups revealed that some aspects of sibling relationships were constant, such as contact routines and feelings of attachment to the sibling group. This contributed to the notion that sibling relationships are experienced as a *"continuous connection and shared life together"* (Anthony White). It is likely that

retrospective accounts lessen the significance of periods of lower importance, similarly to how episodes of conflict diminish in significance in later life (Bedford et al., 2000; Goetting, 1986; Ross and Milgram, 1982). However, multiple voices revealed that an impression of continuity was also facilitated by gradually adapting to change when re-negotiating sibling relationships over the life-course.

'Next steps on the NHS five year forward view' (NHS England, 2017) highlights the difficulties facing the NHS due to increasing numbers of frail older adults who need to be helped to live independently in the community, rather than repeatedly being admitted to hospital. This has stimulated debate about the pressure placed on the health and social care sector, which seems ill-equipped to meet the needs of dependent older adults in the future given the impact of austerity policies on social care and significant cuts in funding. My findings highlighted that participants' sense of responsibility towards siblings who appeared frail or vulnerable became heightened in response to adversity, and that they gained a sense of satisfaction from being able to help one another. Thompson (2014) also calls for social care professionals to discover ways to help older adults remain independent of formal services. Currently, siblings are not seen as contributing significantly to the health and well-being of older adults, and sibling care-givers are not recognised in national policies. It is well known that social support reduces loneliness, whilst tension in family relationships can increase loneliness (Chen and Feely, 2014). Reducing loneliness has been identified as a national priority in a new government policy paper titled 'A connected Society – a strategy for tackling loneliness' (HM Government, 2018). This highlights that loneliness is a major public health matter and that strong social networks are important in alleviating loneliness. Siblings are important network members, capable of supporting emotionally and often practically e.g. collecting prescriptions, shopping, cooking meals. Furthermore, one of the aims set out in the 'Caring for Our Future' White Paper (Lansley and Burstow, 2018) is to reduce carers' social isolation and my findings revealed that support received from siblings by older adults who were caring for their spouse was of

paramount importance in reducing loneliness. However, some older adults will need supporting to maintain close sibling relationships by finding ways in which they can meet up with their siblings, or, if unable to meet in person, stay connected. The participants in my study embraced technology as a means of keeping more connected with siblings, even nearby siblings, demonstrating that technology can facilitate immediate and highly effective support in later life. Thus, policies aimed at ensuring that older adults are able to use technology to their best advantage could be developed via the voluntary and education sector and would bring younger and older generations together.

The recent Foresight report 'Future of an ageing population' (Government Office for Science, 2016), outlines that more needs to be done to empower older adults to continue to contribute to society and recognises that families play a key supporting role. This is in keeping with my call to encourage professionals to find ways to facilitate older adults' support exchange with their siblings. There has been a persistent failure to recognise in policy, the diversity of family and diversity of care and support relationships. One of ten principles set out in 'Reimagining community services – making the most of our assets' (Charles et al., 2018) focuses on involving families and carers as well as communities in the planning and delivery of care, and involving them in assessing needs and in helping to address these needs. These are public policy issues that siblings can contribute to.

10.4 Gendered dimensions of sibling relationships

In this section I focus on my fourth research question and discuss the gendered dimensions of late life sibling relationships. I reiterate how gender expectations created divergence in some participants' childhood sibling relationships and revisit the reasons for this. Next, I discuss how gender influenced different opportunities for some participants to spend time with their siblings during middle adulthood before showing how gender differences seem

less important in later life. Finally, I discuss the different challenges faced by some female and male participants in maintaining their current sibling relationships.

A life-course perspective revealed that parental expectations, a preference for same-sex friendships, and conservative gender norms present in society during the time that they were raised, led to gender divisions in some participants' childhood sibling relationships. Whilst some female participants recalled restrictions in play and schooling, their brothers were expected to work harder at school or support family concerns (Chapter Nines, pages 228-229). Thus, opportunities for opposite-sex siblings to share common ground were limited for some participants. Although the influence of gender-based division on participants' sibling relationships lessened over the life-course in line with changing gender norms in society, the emotional distance created between siblings who experienced extreme gender division was not easy to overcome as it facilitated greater independence from each other.

As discussed in Chapter Nine (pages 234-237), I also found that gender affected participants' sibling relationships with respect to work and family life-course trajectories. Like White (2001), I found that parenthood renewed some participants' sibling relationships but, in addition, I noted continuing gender differences. Sisters were more likely to remain proximate to their families of origin during early adulthood, which created opportunity for female participants to work, live with or raise their children with their nearby sisters. However, many brothers had less time when career building and parenthood coincided, particularly those who were not proximate to their siblings. Although some male participants felt that parenthood drew them closer to siblings who they met opportunistically at family gatherings arranged by their mothers, or shared parenting advice with over the telephone, they lacked the everyday exchanges of sisters.

As I outlined in Chapters Two (page 30) and Three (pages 58-59), research into the influence of gender on sibling relationships lacks consensus, and the most recent study finds little evidence of gender effects on sibling relationships over the life-course (Spitze and Trent, 2018). Earlier research which examines gender differences in emotional closeness, contact and support, devalues the role of brothers (Campbell et al., 1999), and raises concerns about older adults without sisters (Martin Matthews, 2001). Despite recalling that gender was influential earlier in life, few participants felt that it was a major influence on their current sibling relationships, particularly emotionally, as reported in Chapter Eight (pages 211-215). I found that participants from mixed-sex sibling groups felt emotionally close to brothers and sisters, and strong alliances exist between opposite-sex siblings, which supports the femaleness principle (Chapter Two, page 30). I found strong alliances between same-sex siblings too, which supports the sex-commonality principle (Chapter Two, page 30), and conclude, therefore, that neither principle alone offers an adequate explanation.

As discussed in Chapter Eight, both male and female participants highlighted support as a key feature of sibling relationships across the life-course. Often, who was turned to for support depended on who was best able to provide support, and sometimes more than one sibling, of either sex, supported another sibling together. Although some support exchange conforms to traditional gender stereotypes (see Chapter Eight, page 211), some participants preferred to call upon a brother in a crisis. While gender influenced participants' expectations about the role that brothers and sisters play in support, this was nuanced, and support was not lacking, when needed, for those without sisters. I found that family culture and feelings of reciprocity (see Chapter Eight, page 211) also influenced sibling support exchange. Participants felt that their sibling *deserved* attention for helping them previously, irrespective of gender.

Like Connidis (1989), I found that despite more contact between sisters, they were not any more likely to be close friends than brothers. Participants from mixed-sex sibling groups report variation in contact based on geographical proximity and need. Those who live near to siblings enjoy regular face-to-face contact, irrespective of gender, and the siblings in most contact in this study are a nearby brother-sister pair. In Chapter Seven (pages 183-186), I noted that some female participants cited barriers to connecting with siblings that male participants have not experienced, such as practical and financial difficulties in visiting or hosting siblings, which need addressing. Although these applied more to widows who lived alone, some married women raised them too. However, I also reported that some male participants found forming new friendships has declined, emphasising instead, the stability of their sibling relationships and challenging the notion that sibling relationships lack importance for men (Campbell et al., 1999). Martin Matthew's (2001) suggests that older adults without sisters may lack support, and my finding that older men could be lonely were it not for their siblings, adds weight to her call to address the issue of older men at risk of isolation.

Quantitative research studies suggest that sisters form stronger ties than brothers (Lee et al., 1990; Spitze and Trent, 2006). However, I found that although some male participants report their feelings towards their siblings differently to female participants, it did not mean that they valued them less. My findings also indicate that how expressive participants were, may relate more to family culture than gender because both female and male participants from family-oriented sibling groups used terms such as "*love*" and "*adore*", whereas those whose family culture promoted independence used terms such as "*strong*" or "*close*". There were differences in male and female participants' narrative styles too. Female participants reported conversations more than male participants, and some female participants' accounts were emotionally charged. For instance, a female participant parting from her sibling describes "*a huge wrench*" whereas a male participant refers to parting as "*the*

beginning of us going our separate ways". However, male participants raised in family-oriented sibling groups or mainly with sisters were more expressive than female participants raised in less family-oriented groups or mainly with brothers. Explanations based on gender alone do not adequately account for my findings. Participants also emphasised that their siblings' positive traits, areas of commonality, their acceptance of age and gender differences, and their family culture were important. In Chapter Nine (pages 223-234), I drew attention to family culture either promoting family as the nucleus around which social networks revolve, or as a vessel within which individuals develop, then leave and go their own way. As Chambers et al. (2009) note, most siblings share a common upbringing and participants who experienced family-oriented upbringings emphasised belonging and emotional support, whereas those whose family culture promoted independence looked to shared interests to bind them and value practical support and advice. Thus, it seems that family culture and the gender balance of sibling groups, together, have a lasting influence.

10.5 Suggestions for further research

In my discussion above, I have alluded to potential areas for future research which relate to: exploring how to tap into siblings' supportive potential in later life; the need to further understand why changes in emotional closeness occurred in some participants' sibling relationships over the life-course; and whether the apparent lack of sibling support in response to divorce is significant and/or likely to change for future cohorts. Following up the questions I have raised regarding the interplay between gender, family culture and obligatory versus voluntary practices between siblings, may also aid further understanding.

Because participants identified that practical support exchange was inhibited if barriers to meeting in person arose, and that diminishing supportive contribution is upsetting, investigating how to support older adults in their endeavour to reciprocate sibling support

would be beneficial. In order to discover how they can be helped to continue to engage with their siblings, and be reassured that diminishing input has value. It seems that further detailed work is needed into how siblings can continue to contribute, the emotional gains which could result, and how other family members and professionals facilitate this. As Barnes (2012) pointed out, siblings have detailed knowledge and understanding about each other's needs. Furthermore, exploring whether moves nearer to siblings, or living with siblings, may be worthwhile because some participants believe that this can work successfully and wish to avoid becoming dependent on adult children. In addition, because fear of sibling loss was high amongst participants, research into how sibling loss affects older adults' emotional well-being, and how they might be supported at such times, requires attention.

Some of my findings warrant further explaining, such as my perplexing yet encouraging finding that siblings who were not close earlier in life, developed close and supportive relationships over the life-course. Furthermore, my finding that divorced participants' need for support from their siblings went unrecognised, is concerning given that divorce is more common now. However, the effects of divorce may be better understood nowadays, so research into the supportive contribution of siblings may be a topic for the future. My findings that gender differences appear to be less important in later life; that gender alone does not determine observed differences in male and female participants' experience of their sibling relationships over the life-course; and how expressive participants were seems related to their family culture, rather than their gender alone, may require further attention

Finally, even a qualitative approach which elicits multiple accounts provides a limited view of participants' lived experiences of their sibling relationships. Some participants suggested that further understanding might be gained by observing their sibling group over time. This raises the question as to whether documentary or diary methods would facilitate further

understanding and/or address the issue that some participants articulated clearly why their siblings are important, whilst others struggled to express why. Observational or other methods might also enable those who are unable to participate in an interview due to communication and hearing problems, to engage with the research process.

10.6 Reflections on the research design and methods

I now turn my attention to reflecting on the research design and methods that I employed. Here, I discuss the benefits of obtaining multiple, rather than single or dyadic perspectives on sibling relationships; my reasons for adopting a biographical approach; and issues which arose when I carried out my fieldwork. Next, I discuss what analytical challenges I faced and how I managed them, and conclude by reflecting on my role as a researcher and the lessons that I have learnt.

A clear benefit of obtaining multiple rather than single perspectives was that they produced, as I had aimed for, a more rounded picture than single accounts. Although participants from the same sibling group sometimes discussed the same major events, the strength of multiple accounts was that they provided a detailed picture of ordinary everyday life. While individual accounts may have omitted details about everyday interactions, these became foregrounded once siblings' accounts were combined because each participant revealed different details about them. For instance, one sibling might mention a weekly meal, another that they shop together, and so on. The multiple perspective approach also highlighted the difficulty of exploring topics that those being researched feel are mundane.

Another benefit was that complementary accounts emphasised significant influences such as family culture, and highlighted the interdependency, not just of siblings, but of wider family relationships over time. They also provided more details about non-participating

siblings than a single perspective would have. Multiple accounts helped me to understand some sensitivities, such as tensions in sibling-in-law relationships, or topics that are divisive. Accounts that were not complementary tended to highlight external influences such as geographical proximity or work-related issues.

My choice to listen to participants' biographical accounts arose from my aim to understand how the past shaped current meaning. For instance, using a holistic approach aided understanding of why sisters maintained more contact during early parenthood compared to brothers, a finding which reflected gender norms during the era in which they raised their children. This type of understanding would not have been gained from only paying attention to participants' current relationships. Similarly, my finding that some female participants find it more difficult to see their siblings in person nowadays, needs to be understood in current context (e.g. barriers presenting to travelling and hosting) as well as past context (e.g. those female participants have less disposable income, they downsized because they live alone, and/or they never learnt to drive).

Although the methods I employed were advantageous in offering "*a rich and rewarding approach to understanding in a humanistic way the lives of others*" (Merrill and West 2009: 190), they were not without difficulty. As detailed in Chapter Five (page 99) and as Connidis (2007) noted, the fact that participants were known to each other created additional complexities. For example, recruiting siblings from the same family was less straightforward than recruiting individual subjects, because it necessitated the sibling who responded first to accurately pass study details on to their siblings, and gain permission for me to contact them. An unforeseen development was that assurances that siblings were willing to participate could not be taken at face value, because it became apparent that some people were not truly volunteering. Like them, I felt uncomfortable about someone participating to

please their sibling which I felt was bordering on coercion, which is unethical, and something I wanted to avoid at all costs. Furthermore, feeding back to an over enthusiastic volunteer that their siblings did not want to take part needed diplomacy, and I was careful to base this conversation on their siblings' reservations about being interviewed by a stranger, rather than them not wanting to discuss their sibling relationships. I was also contacted by people who did not meet the study criteria who, despite realising this, were keen to talk to me about their past family relationships, usually with deceased siblings, but sometimes with adult children. This needed handling sensitively as some people just wanted to talk to someone, or vent frustrations about difficult family ties, whereas others desired to help: the balance between protecting myself and not making vulnerable people feel rejected was difficult.

During the interviews, addressing my concerns that participants might be curious about what their siblings had told me, necessitated stating from the outset that each interview was individual. This put me and the participants at ease, and participants were incredibly focused on talking about their own perspectives on their sibling relationships. Difficulties that arose were the reverse of what I had expected. For instance, assumptions that I would have been told about something by another sibling were common and I wondered, on reflection, whether I became less inclined to probe about sensitive topics once one participant had provided me with details about it already.

An issue which participants actually raised, was whether people who had difficult sibling relationship would be likely to participate, given that I would need to interview their siblings too. My experience during recruitment, discussed above (page 285), indicates that this is a valid concern. However, it was not my aim to characterise all types of sibling relationships in later life, but to ascertain whether siblings play an important role in the lives of older adults. To this aim I am satisfied that my sample produced sufficient data to support my findings. Also, by their own admission, not all participants' sibling relationships were always

positive and their accounts provide insights into why emotional distance arose and how it was resolved.

Whilst the qualitative exploratory nature of this study prohibits generalisations, it is important to recognise the degree to which my findings might or might not be unique to my participants who have lived through many social changes. As discussed earlier (page 268), many participants experienced disruption to their family lives as a result of the Second World War and/or hardship due to post War austerity. Despite these experiences being unique, their consequences are not. There are parallels between participants' experiences of being raised by lone working mothers during the War and family life being rebuilt afterwards and contemporary families where children experience parents divorcing, re-marrying and forming new family structures. As Connidis (2007) points out, because modern family life is liable to disruption some individuals experience fluidity in what family constitutes. Moreover, the prediction that modern families will comprise two or three closely spaced siblings (Bank and Kahn, 1997) ignores the effect of divorce and re-marriage in creating diverse family structures. Individuals need to be able to adapt to changing family forms, just as my participants adapted to fathers returning from the War and new siblings being born.

As noted in Chapter Five (pages 112-113), although participants' family structure and culture is diverse, I was unable to recruit step or half siblings. I noted that parental divorce is uncommon amongst my participants and established, during recruitment, that it was uncommon amongst the wider pool of older adults that I talked to about the study. An additional issue was that no adults from ethnic minority backgrounds came forward either. Although my sample was not as diverse as I originally intended, overall, I am satisfied that my interview sample has not restricted my aims. I felt that saturation point was met and my decision to leave the field made at the right point because, although more depth was being added to emerging themes, no new themes emerged from the narratives, and I had a wealth of detailed interview material suited to meet the exploratory aims of this study. However,

whether a more diverse sample of siblings could be obtained using a wider campaign is a consideration for the future particularly, as discussed in Chapter Five (pages 111-112), with the knowledge that interviewing dispersed siblings via telephone or via Skype was of merit.

As discussed in Chapter Five, telephone/Skype interviews had the benefit of being more convenient, less intrusive safer, and they enabled me to take notes without seeming inattentive. I did not find them to be of poorer quality than face-to-face interviews. However, the lack of visual cues made it difficult to determine when I needed to interject, and whether silences represented pauses for thought, signs of distress, or distraction. It was not possible to determine whether rapport was better established in face-to-face interviews because, in all three types of interview, some participants needed prompting to elaborate further, whereas others interviewed in a more relaxed manner and needed little prompting. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Five, participants' reasons for choosing telephone interviews may be significant too (see page 112).

A challenge faced by researchers is how to approach the issue of evaluating the quality of qualitative research. One way of evaluating qualitative research is to demonstrate trustworthiness, comprised of trustworthiness of interpretation, authenticity, coherence, claims about typicality, and how the researcher's own perspective shapes interpretation (Fossey et al., 2002). I have provided in Chapter Five and Appendices Ten to Fourteen, a transparent account of my methods and how I arrived at my findings. As discussed in Chapters Four (page 93) and Five (pages 113-121), grounded theory methodology has the benefit of establishing a process of reflecting, challenging and appraising interpretations from the outset.

In order to address authenticity, I used illustrative examples in participants' own words, alongside my interpretation; ensured that the views of families or individuals who are outliers were presented; and used reflexive practice to consider how I, in my role as the researcher,

may have influenced the data. I also considered how my findings contribute to knowledge, explained what experiences are unique to these study participants, and make no claim to generalise, highlighting throughout the exploratory nature of this research.

As highlighted in Chapter One (page 2), my quantitative background and focus on health service research and enterprise meant that I was suited to undertake a project of this nature. Conversely, my inexperience in qualitative research and lack of specialist knowledge in my new chosen field of social gerontology, meant I needed to rise to the challenge of changing disciplines. I inevitably learnt lessons during the conduct of my research. My analytical background meant that I have a well-established discipline when it comes to managing the research process. However, on reflection, my systematic approach when engaging in grounded theory methodology perhaps resulted in me learning the hard way about the difficulty of, as a lone researcher, managing the wealth of data generated by my research.

Grounded theory necessitates continuing data collection until sufficient data has been collected to support the theoretical categories that arise (Charmaz 2006, 2012). However, a key aim of my study was to consider sibling relationships within, as well as across, family groups, which involved interviewing complete sibling groups. With hindsight, I may have gathered more data than was needed to support some categories, although I had no way of predicting which siblings within a group might not conform to, or alternatively best represent, the family view. Also, having stated my intention to interview complete sibling groups from the outset, not doing so would have been contrary to my intention to cause no upset, as it may have seemed as if I was rejecting particular siblings' viewpoints.

Organising data was challenging. In order to avoid feeling overwhelmed, I systematically organised data and coded transcripts using Nvivo10, which had the advantage of thoroughly considering all of my data, but was less suited to the task of exploring meaning. As Merrill and West (2009) note, using computer software for analysis can fragment biographical data

and risk not making the best use of the researcher. My quantitative research background and experience of using SPSS to interrogate multi-variate datasets, made me more critical of Nvivo10 as a qualitative data analysis tool than fellow students who I was trained alongside. Much like Fossey et al. (2002) report, I found Nvivo10 extremely useful for organising and querying data initially, but preferred to intuitively search for meaning by returning to sections of coded transcripts, fieldnotes and memos, in order to contextualise codes and explore concepts. I enjoyed keeping a reflective journal, exploring and coding the transcripts, reflecting on my coding and analysis, and engaging in memo writing. Challenging my own assumptions and being prepared to alter my viewpoint as I went along, felt disheartening sometimes and akin to having a eureka moment at others. Having a wealth of rich, interesting material can, as Charmaz (2012) cautions, run the risk of becoming too descriptive. In order to counter this tendency, I returned to analytic questioning and, at my supervisors' suggestion, to my memos.

It did feel as if I was "*grappling*" with my initial "*standpoint*" and "*shifting positions*" (Charmaz, 2012; 4) as my concepts took shape and my understanding of my findings evolved.

A challenging issue that arose for me personally came not in the doing of the research, but in the writing up. This is where I found maintaining confidentiality particularly difficult due to the fine balance between representing participants' accounts truthfully and in ensuring that nothing I have written here can upset someone's sibling relationship. Several participants would not have discussed particular issues during their interview if they thought their sibling could find out, and others were understandably keen that conflicts which have been resolved remain so. This was a difficult judgement to make sometimes. However, I believe that the steps I have taken to anonymise the families, and avoid quoting sensitive accounts directly have achieved this aim.

Having reflected in Chapter One (pages 3-6) and Chapter Four (pages 90-92) about my own preconceptions, I reflect further here on how influential this may have been during the

interview process, and when interpreting my findings. This is important because in telling each sibling group's story, when faced with discrepancies, I sometimes questioned whose version seemed most plausible, despite my intentions to be guided by the philosophical assumption of the interpretive tradition that truth takes many forms (Clarke, 2001). As Merrill and West (2009: 190) emphasise, there is a balance between deciding: *"where and how to position ourselves as well as recognising the importance of being sensitive to what we don't know and need to learn."*

As I discussed in Chapter Four (pages 90-92), whether I presented as an insider or outsider was not obvious and I found myself, in many respects, as Kerstetter (2012) reports, occupying a space that fits between those two perspectives. As someone who has, and is, a sibling, I have my own impression of what sibling relationships mean and, in this respect, present as an insider. However, as discussed in Chapter One (pages 3-6), having predominantly male relatives means I have more family experience of sibling relationships with and between brothers although through my identity as a woman, daughter, niece and friend, I have a view of the meaning of sisterhood too.

Previous research indicates that gender-of-interviewer effects arise in both face-to-face and telephone interviews, if the topic being discussed is sensitive, and if the interviewer and participant are of the opposite sex (Fuchs, 2009). It is difficult to determine whether being a female researcher was influential. As discussed earlier, many female participants were expressive and easy to establish rapport with, even those who were worried about how they might come across during the interview. None of the men I interviewed expressed concerns about being interviewed and five interviews with men felt like the easy conversations that I had with women. These men were open about their feelings, positive about the research, offered insight into the effect that doing the research would have on me, and gave me details

about sensitive issues that their siblings omitted to tell me. Conversely, I found several female participants difficult to engage with. Thus, many features of who I am will have inevitably affected participants' responses to the research questions posed, and my response to their curiosity about me, because there is no denying that I form part of the process.

I found some advantages in embarking on research in a new field because not having an abundance of prior knowledge made me less inclined to draw hasty conclusions or have fixed ideas about what findings I might want to foreground. However, the wealth of material gained, meant that I was not able to represent every participant's point of view or attend to every theme that emerged. At times I struggled, finding the writing process enjoyable, yet lonely and sometimes overwhelming. Through these difficult times, persistence became my mantra. Finally, returning to the literature after being immersed in my own findings for so long felt challenging. I worried that my emergent findings might not be as important and unique as I believe. Revisiting the literature post-analysis felt different, as I was now focusing on how other research related to specific findings, rather than looking for gaps in existing research. Having updated my literature search, I found that Merz and De Jong Gierveld, (2014) had published their paper whilst I was analysing my findings, providing new material for comparison, and now, at the time of final editing, a paper by Spitze and Trent (2018) has just been published.

10.7 Conclusion: contributing to the knowledge base

In this concluding section of my thesis I briefly summarise my main conclusions. First, I attend to the nature and meaning of sibling relationships in later life. Next, I consider what contribution my study findings have made to existing knowledge, and how a biographical

approach enabled me to uncover and understand aspects of sibling relationships. Finally, I summarise work yet to be done and end with some final reflections.

I have contributed to a small body of existing research (e.g. Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1987; Connidis, 1992; Bank, 1995; and Braboy-Jackson et al., 2007) which finds siblings to be important relationships because of their shared history, heritage, and family connections. I also found them to be adaptable, complex and nuanced. Participants' sibling relationships were impacted by life-course events such as leaving home, marriage, parenthood, widowhood and retirement. In addition, emotional closeness, companionship and support, were foregrounded as ever-present features of participants' sibling relationships, despite ebb and flow across the life-course. Sibling relationships are important as: attachment relationships; as key family relationships bound by shared family culture and traditions; through their history of reciprocal support, empathy and understanding; and as a means to enjoy engaging in everyday talk, reminiscing and life review. Their endurance contributes to their importance in that they are characterised by staying power, remaining important even when disruptions occur or connections wane. I found that support exchange between participants and their siblings increased in later life, with physical illness and widowhood eliciting the most support. Although support exchange was diverse, comprising emotional support, companionship, and practical support, routine practical support was a less recognised form of support. Irrespective of whether participants viewed sibling relationships as consistently important or changeable, they became more important in later life to most participants.

My findings support those who find that sibling relationships are characterised by ebb and flow across the life-course; that geographical proximity is important in maintaining contact and support, particularly in later life; and that education is related to sibling dispersal, as was gender in my study. My findings shed more light on the long-term nature of support exchange between siblings; the long-term influence of family culture and structure; how siblings function as special types of friendships; concern about siblings dying drawing them

closer; why marriage mostly strengthens sibling ties; how in-law relationships are formed and negotiated; why divorce receives less support from siblings than other adverse life events; and that mellowing in later life leads to positive changes in attitude towards siblings.

In addition, some of my findings challenge previous research. For instance, despite ebb and flow in certain aspects of sibling relationships, stability was important. I also found that emotionally distant siblings can form close, supportive relationships; gender is not as important, particularly emotionally, as thought, in later life but, amongst my participants, gender did create differences in opportunities to spend time together earlier in life; every day talk was important to participants and their siblings, not just reminiscing about their shared past; routine support was considered mundane and only foregrounded by multiple accounts; and the means used to connect with siblings are more accessible and instantaneous than they used to be. Despite the increasing importance of siblings in later life and retirement creating opportunity for them to spend time together, I found that some barriers to contact and support were arising with age. Although I found that reciprocity influenced sibling support exchange, support did not always need to be balanced because satisfaction was gained from providing help and a biographical approach revealed that payback could extend back to kindness received in childhood. However, my finding that some older adults' ability to provide help is compromised by infirmity, needs addressing in order to avoid feelings of uselessness arising.

Finally, I found that family culture played an important role in shaping sibling relationships and determining whether individuals develop a strong sense of belonging to their sibling group, or believe they should be independent from them. Although traditional maternal kin keeping roles are dissipating amongst participants whose sibling groups are dispersed, having more means of remaining connected is advantageous, and may become more so for future generations of older adults who, unlike this cohort, will have grown up with technology. Throughout their biographical narratives, participants indicate that sibling

relationships have the advantage of being flexible family relationships that remain connected during periods of lesser importance. Despite a focus on the likelihood of siblings of the future being more closely spaced and forming intense sibling bonds, my finding that those spaced widely in age have a special relationship, coupled with the fact that those siblings in this study who were not raised together in the same parental home developed strong attachments nevertheless, may be of significance and of hope to future generations who may experience more flexible family structures.

The methodology I employed had several advantages. Multiple perspectives revealed that gaining a holistic picture of what siblings mean to each other conveyed that changing circumstances in later life such as widowhood, ill-health, or merely living nearby, facilitated a range of support exchange and promoted siblings as important social companions. Although other researchers find siblings provide important supportive relationships following widowhood (O'Bryant, 1988; White, 2001; Merz and De Jong Gierveld, 2015), biographical accounts from within sibling groups revealed that support often began prior to widowhood, and continued afterwards. An advantage of interviewing members of the same sibling group is that it produced a more complete picture of support exchange as I identified that individual accounts under report practical support and interactions considered to be mundane. Another benefit of my approach was that, due to technological advances, I was not restricted to interviewing sibling groups who were not entirely proximate and found older adults to be more at ease with this process than I had predicted. On balance I felt that the benefit of conducting telephone and Skype interviews in enabling me to interview dispersed sibling groups, outweighed the concerns and drawbacks discussed earlier.

As indicated above (pages 281-282), there is still work to be done because no one study and/or set of techniques can provide all the answers, and gaps in knowledge remain. As future cohorts of older adults will be more diverse, the fact that my sample did not include participants from ethnic minority backgrounds or half or step siblings will need addressing

in future research. Furthermore, whether with increasing rates of divorce and more understanding of the effects of divorce, sibling support will be more forthcoming for future generations of older adults, merits consideration. I also noted a need to understand and support those experiencing sibling loss in later life, something that has become more relevant due to the increased likelihood of siblings ageing together into later life. I found potential for siblings to support or even care for each other in later life, but outlined that work is needed to explore how this can be facilitated. Moreover, this might form part of a more general issue regarding how older adults' supportive contributions can be recognised, encouraged and above all valued.

My findings are relevant to policy makers because the potentially supportive role of siblings is not identified in recent policy documents or debates surrounding the care and support of older adults. Given the current background in the UK of continuing austerity and cuts to public services it is clear that alternatives need to be sought. Spouses and adult children seem to be at the centre of family policies surrounding older adults, despite recognition that they are often supporting their own families, busy with careers, or likely to be co-resident carers who need some respite from caring duties. Lack of professional support resulting from funding cuts places additional pressures on families to care and support their older relatives, yet siblings appear to be an unrecognised 'resource' in this respect. Sibling relationships are important because of their life long connectivity. Although there is variation in the levels of importance at different points in the life-course, in later life the key message is that individuals do not want to lose the connections with someone they have shared so much of their life history with. The findings presented in this thesis thus have practical value for health and social care agencies, practitioners, older people, and policy makers.

Finally, as one participant predicted, I have been dealing with an extremely interesting research subject and have uncovered some wonderful and enlightening findings. I have been immersed in what has been a difficult yet rewarding personal journey, as well as an

opportunity to discover and share knowledge, for over four years. As my participants articulated in surprised tones when reflecting on their sibling relationships, at my time of life we rarely think about the fact that our siblings are likely to be our longest relationship. In later life, it seems, we come to this realisation. The longevity, flexibility and adaptability of sibling relationships makes them extremely important. Again, one of my participants noted that when reflecting on research we focus on the subjects of the research, but the researcher will be affected too. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on the enduring nature of sibling relationships and on how the ups and downs of participants' lived experiences of being, and of having siblings, creates a sense of optimism for the future. This is because my participants and their siblings can, and have, survived adversity, and it is this staying power which highlights siblings as central relationships when they are viewed through a long lens. I hope that in illustrating my findings I have done them justice and allowed participants' voices to be heard within this thesis in the way that they continually echo in my mind and will do so, I suspect, for many years to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: Interview Guide

Interviews are open interviews, so broad questions will be asked. Examples of prompts that may be used to elicit further information are provided, but may not be needed as the aim is to allow the interviewee to steer the direction of the interview. Prompt questions are in italics.

Introductory comments

To begin with, can we fill out the data collection form together, so that you can help me work out who is who.

I'm interested in finding out what your sibling means to you, so I'd like to ask you to choose whether you want to start with the here and now, or start with childhood memories, or another point in time of your own choosing.

Growing up together

How would you describe your relationship with each of your siblings when you were growing up? What sort of things you did together and how close you felt to them?

[What kinds of early memories do you have about each of your siblings?]

[any opportunities to share time/do things – school, common friends, hobbies]

[Does being the same sex or opposite sex to your sibling make any difference?]

[happy times/difficult times?]

[teenage years?][confiding / conflict / more involved with friends?]

Becoming independent

Thinking about the time at which all of you started to become independent and part company from each other, did you find this difficult or easy? Can you explain why?

[reasons for leaving home for each of you, separation easy/difficult, did you want to feel independent from siblings? If so benefits of being away from them, or anything that you really missed? Did you keep in touch much?]

Key events and turning points in the relationship

Can you think of ways in which your sibling relationships have changed from childhood to middle age to now? Why do you think the relationship has changed (or not?)

[events/people that affected relationship in either a good way or a bad way (or both) (work, spouse, children, family bereavements, family arguments, illness, financial differences etc.)]

Current relationship

How would you describe your current relationships with your siblings?

Do you feel that you have got on better with your sibling as you got older, or worse? If your relationship has changed as you got older, can you explain how?

[how often do they meet? Do they do anything together? What stops you seeing your siblings more?]

[Is there anything that you prefer to do with your sibling than with anyone else? Does your sibling know things about you that no one else does?]

[If not covered in the interview - do you think that the gender of your sibling makes a difference to how well you get on with them? In what way do you think siblings are important to you and more generally?]

Summing up

Sum up key points of interview - is there anything they want to add or clarify. If there is a sibling that they have not mentioned much, ask them if there is anything they want to say about that sibling before the interview ends (but be sensitive to the fact that they might not!).

Appendix Two: Information sheet, invitation letters and consent forms

Information Sheet



Sibling Relationships in Old Age

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study, Sibling Relationships in Old Age which is being undertaken by Mrs Helen Ogden. I (Helen Ogden) am a PhD Candidate who is supervised by Professor Mo Ray, and Professor Miriam Bernard, from Keele University. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with your siblings, and with other friends and relatives if you wish. Please ask me (Helen Ogden) if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Aims of the Research

The aim of my study is to find out whether siblings are important in the lives of older adults and whether peoples' feelings about their siblings change as they get older. To find this out, I want to ask people to talk about their relationships with their brothers and sisters, from childhood until the present time. This will help me to understand how relationships may change over time and why some sibling relationships change over time whereas others stay relatively consistent over time.

Why have I been invited?

You are being given information because I believe you are in the age group that I wish to study and that you have at least one living sibling who may also be interested in taking part. All siblings, even those who live some distance away, are eligible to take part. Siblings do not have to be full siblings - they can be step, half or adopted siblings, if you have always thought of them as your brother and/or sister. They can be younger or older than you.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other for my records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons. Please note that should you withdraw from the study, your siblings will be contacted, and may also be withdrawn from the study. Similarly, should one of your siblings withdraw from the study you may be withdrawn from the study. The exception to this would be for large sibling groups where two or more siblings wish to remain in the study.

What will happen if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part, please contact me by phone (number provided) or e-mail (e-mail address provided) or by post using the slip provided in the **invitation letter**. I will be happy to answer any further questions that you might have about the project.

If you are the first person in your family to find out about the study, I would like you to ask your siblings' permission to give me their contact details so that I can provide them with information about the study. This is so that all of your siblings can have the opportunity to take part in the study. Alternatively, you could pass on my contact details to your siblings should they wish to contact me directly first.

Once you and at least one of your siblings indicate that they wish to take part, I will contact you to arrange individual interviews. The interview can take place in your own home, or if you prefer somewhere else that you feel comfortable with. The interview may take 1-3 hours, depending on how

many siblings you have to talk about. Interviews will be conducted by me (Helen Ogden), and I will ask your permission to record them, and to take notes.

Before the interview begins I will check that you have read the information about the study and answer any questions that you might have. I will then ask you to sign the consent form. Before the main interview starts the data collection form will be completed. This asks for some background data and will be used to help me to understand each person's family relationships and circumstances. The main interview will be rather like a conversation between us, in which I will ask you to talk about your sibling relationship over your life time.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

Although there are no immediate or direct benefits to you from taking part, it will provide you with the opportunity to talk about your experience of growing up with siblings and sharing a lifetime of memories and events with them. The research study as a whole has the following benefits:-

- The study findings will help me to learn about and understand the role that siblings have played in each person's family life, from their viewpoint.
- By collecting information from brothers and sisters, it might help me to understand if there are any differences in the importance of siblings in the lives of brothers, compared to sisters, or whether brothers and sisters just talk about each other differently.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

Although the interview questions are not intended to cause any distress, talking about past events or family life can be an emotional experience. Therefore, I will be sensitive and you are free to refrain from answering any questions that you do not wish to answer. Should you become upset during the interview, I will ask you whether you want to continue or whether you would prefer to stop the interview.

How will information about me be used?

The information from your interview will be collected and used as follows:-

- 1) A short form will be used to collect basic information that will help me to understand who is in your family. Any identifying information (name and address, telephone number) will be transferred to a contact spreadsheet, which will password protected and saved securely. Once the study is complete, the contact sheet will be destroyed. All data collection forms will be anonymised, kept in a locked filing cabinet, and destroyed once they are no longer required.
- 2) At the start of each interview, I will ask your permission to record the interview. All interviews will be transcribed, and notes will be typed up. Electronic files of interview transcripts and notes will be password protected and stored securely. The electronic transcripts and notes will be coded, so that your name and the names of any of your family members are removed. Once electronic copies of the data have been produced they will be stored securely and the originals e.g. notes and recordings, will be destroyed.

The interview data and field notes will be analysed and used to produce a research report that will form part of my (Helen Ogden) Doctoral thesis. The results may also be presented in summary (shorter) form at events such as conferences and written up for publication in relevant journals. No reports will contain identifying information.

- 3) I may want to use some of the things that you said and will ask permission to use your quotations (no real names or any other identifying information will be included in any quotations).

All data relating to the project will be kept for 12 months following completion of the study, following which it will be destroyed. There is no intention to use the information for any further research projects.

Who will have access to information about me?

Only Helen Ogden and her PhD supervisors will have access to the data. If help is needed to transcribe the interviews, the transcriber will be bound by a confidentiality agreement. All reported information will be made anonymous so it will not be possible to identify you personally.

I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law.

Who is funding and organising the research?

This research is funded and organised by Keele University.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact **Helen Ogden** on (number provided) or (e-mail address provided).

Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher you may contact **Professor Mo Ray** on (number provided) or (e-mail address provided); or **Professor Miriam Bernard** on **01782 734067** or (number provided) or (e-mail address provided).

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer
Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building
Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

Contact for further information.

Name: Helen Ogden.

Address: Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, Keele University, Keele, STAFFS, ST55BG.

Contact: Telephone: (number provided) or e-mail: (e-mail address provided).

< Letter to potential participants >



Centre for Social Gerontology
Claus Moser, Room CM0.18
Keele University
Keele
STAFFS
ST5 5BG

<Date to be inserted>

Research Study Invitation: Sibling Relationships in Old Age

My name is Helen Ogden, and I am currently studying for a PhD in Social Gerontology at Keele University. I am writing to ask you if you would like to take part in my research study.

What is the study about?

I would like to talk to you about your relationship with your brothers and/or sisters from childhood, through adulthood, and up until the present time (see **Information Sheet**). Although previous research studies show that the sibling relationship is one of the longest relationships most people experience in a lifetime, and is important for reminiscence and emotional support, few researchers have asked older people in person about their sibling relationships. Therefore, I feel it is important to ask people directly about their sibling relationships over their entire lifetime.

Who can take part in the study?

I am interested in talking to people aged 70 or older who have at least one sibling. I would also like to talk to any of your siblings who are willing to take part. This will help me to understand how sibling relationships change from childhood, to adulthood, and importantly as they grow older. ***Please note that in order to take part in this study, at least one of your siblings also needs to take part.***

How can my siblings find out about the study?

With your sibling's permission, you could give me their contact details so that I can write to them about the study, or you could give them my contact details so that they can contact me directly.

What do I do if I want to take part?

Please take time to read the **information sheet** included with this letter, which gives information about the study and how to take part. Please contact me if there is anything that you do not understand or if you have any questions about the project. Should you wish to take part please telephone me on (number provided), e-mail me at (e-mail address provided), or return the slip at the end of this letter.

What happens next?

Once I know that you and your siblings wish to take part, I will contact each of you to arrange individual interviews. Before your interview begins I will check that you have read the **information sheet** and ask you to sign a **consent form**, which I will also sign. I will leave a copy of the consent form for you to keep.

As detailed in the **information sheet** (Page 2), before the interview starts, I will collect background data to help me understand your family circumstances (see attached **form**). Once the **form** is complete I will ask your permission to record the interview. At the end of the interview I will summarise the main points, check whether there is anything that you wish to add, and ask whether you are happy with the outcome.

What happens to my interview information?

The recorded interview will be transcribed and anonymised. The information that you give me will be analysed to produce a report as part of my Doctoral thesis. Summarised versions of the results might be presented at conferences, or used to produce papers to be published in relevant journals. For further details about how the information is collected and stored please see the **information sheet** (page 2).

What if I change my mind about taking part?

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, so if you change your mind and do not want to take part please contact me (Helen Ogden) on (number provided), so that I can remove your data and contact details from the study. ***Please note that if you withdraw from the study, your siblings' data may be withdrawn too.***

How can I find out more about the study before I decide?

Please take time to read the **information sheet** provided. You are welcome to talk to your family and friends about it, if it helps you to decide. If there is anything that you do not understand, please contact me. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope that the study will be of interest to you and your siblings,

Yours Faithfully,



HL Ogden (Mrs)

You can express interest in taking part by phoning (number provided), e-mailing (e-mail address provided), or by returning this slip to: Helen Ogden, Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, Keele University, Keele, STAFFS, ST5 5BG

Your Name:	Date of Birth:
Address:	Telephone Number:
	E-mail Address:

< letter to siblings whose contact details have been passed on >



Centre for Social Gerontology
Claus Moser, Room CM0.18
Keele University
Keele
STAFFS
ST5 5BG
<Date>

Dear <Name if known>

Research Study Invitation: Sibling Relationships in Old Age.

My name is Helen Ogden, and I am currently studying for a PhD in Social Gerontology at Keele University. I am writing to ask you if you would like to take part in my research study, which is about older adults and their brothers and sisters. I was given your details by your brother/sister because he/she is interested in taking part, and thinks that you might be too.

I am therefore sending you an **information sheet** to give you more information about the project, and a **consent form** that everyone who takes part in the project needs to sign.

What is the study about?

I would like to talk to you about your relationship with your brothers and/or sisters from childhood, through adulthood, and up until the present time (see **Information Sheet**). Although previous research studies show that the sibling relationship is one of the longest relationships most people experience in a lifetime and is important for reminiscence and emotional support, few researchers have asked older people in person about their sibling relationships. Therefore, I feel it is important to ask people directly about their sibling relationships over their entire lifetime.

Who can take part in the study?

Because one of your siblings has already agreed to take part in the study, you are eligible to take part too. It is important that we are able to get more than one point of view in order to understand how sibling relationships change from childhood, to adulthood and then again into older age.

What do I do if I want to take part?

Please take time to read the **information sheet** included with this letter. This gives more information about the study and how to take part. You are welcome to contact me if there is anything that you do not understand. Should you wish to take part please telephone me on (number provided), e-mail me at (e-mail address provided), or return the slip at the end of this letter to me.

What happens next?

Once I know that you are interested in taking part, I will arrange to interview you. Before your interview begins I will check that you have read the **information sheet** and ask you to sign a **consent form** which I will also sign. I will leave a copy of the consent form for you to keep. As detailed in the **information sheet** (Page 2), before the interview starts I will collect

some background data about your family circumstances (see attached **form**). Once the form is complete I will ask your permission to record the interview. At the end of the interview I will summarise the main points, check whether there is anything that you wish to add, and ask whether you are happy with the outcome.

What happens to my interview information?

The recorded interview will be transcribed and anonymised. The information that you give me will be analysed to produce a report as part of my Doctoral thesis. Summarised versions of the results may be presented at conferences, or used to produce papers to be published in relevant journals. For further details about how the information is collected and stored please see the **information sheet** (page 2).

What if I change my mind about taking part?

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, so if you change your mind and do not want to take part anymore, please contact me (Helen Ogden) on (number provided), so that I can remove your data and contact details from the study. ***Please note that if you withdraw from the study your sibling's data may be withdrawn too.***

How can I find out more about the study before I decide?

Please take time to read through the **information sheet** provided. You are welcome to talk to your family and friends about it, if it helps you to decide. If there is anything that you do not understand, please contact me. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope that the study will be of interest to you,

Yours Faithfully,



HL Ogden (Mrs)

You can express interest in taking part by phoning (number provided) e-mailing (e-mail address provided) or by returning this slip to: Helen Ogden, Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, Keele University, Keele, STAFFS, ST5 5BG

Your Name:	Date of Birth:
Address:	Telephone Number:
	E-mail Address:

CONSENT FORM

Sibling Relationships in Old Age



Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:

Helen Ogden, Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, Keele University, Keele, STAFFS, ST55BG. **Telephone:** (number provided) **e-mail** (e-mail address provided).

Please tick box if you agree with the statement

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet (version No2) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my data at any time ☐
3. I understand that if I withdraw my data, my siblings' data may also be withdrawn ☐
4. I agree to take part in this study. ☐
5. I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication. ☐
6. I agree to the interview being audio recorded ☐

Name of participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

CONSENT FORM (for use of quotes)

Sibling Relationships in Old Age



Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:

Helen Ogden, Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, Keele University, Keele, STAFFS, ST55BG. **Telephone:** (number provided) **e-mail** (e-mail address provided).

**Please tick box if you
agree with the statement**

1. I agree for my quotes to be used

☐

2. I do not agree for my quotes to be used

☐

Appendix Three: Ethical Approval letter



Ref: ERP1239

25th June 2015

Helen Ogden
Centre for Social Gerontology
Claus Moser, Room CM0.18
Keele University
Keele University Staffordshire
ST5 5BG

Dear Helen

Re: Sibling Relationships in Old Age

Thank you for submitting your revised application for review and agreeing for your Information Sheet to be used as an example of good practice

I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel. The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel as follows:

Document(s)	Version Number	Date
Summary Document	1	14/05/2015
Invitation letters (x2)	2	23/06/2015
Information Sheet	2	25/06/2015
Interview Guide	1	13/05/2015
Data Collection Proforma	1	14/05/2015

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application (31st January 2016), you must notify the Ethical Review Panel via the ERP administrator at uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

If there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C H Bonemayon'.

Dr Jackie Waterfield
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

CC RI Manager
Supervisor

Appendix Four: DBS Certificate

Standard Certificate		Page 1 of 2		Disclosure & Barring Service	
DBS Fee Charged		Certificate Number		001488353016	
		Date of Issue:		01 JUNE 2015	
Applicant Personal Details		Employment Details			
Surname:	OGDEN	Position applied for:		RESEARCH STUDENT ADULT WORKFORCE	
Forename(s):	HELEN LOUISE	Name of Employer:		KEELE UNIVERSITY	
Other Names:	BELZA, HELEN LOUISE	Countersignatory Details			
Date of Birth:	11 DECEMBER 1967	Registered Person/Body:		DAA KEELE UNIVERSITY	
Place of Birth:	NOTTINGHAM	Countersignatory:		LAURA SAVONA	
Gender:	FEMALE				
Police Records of Convictions, Cautions, Reprimands and Warnings					
NONE RECORDED					
Standard Certificate					
This document is a Standard Criminal Record Certificate within the meaning of sections 113A and 114 of the Police Act 1997.					
Use of certificate information					
The information contained in this certificate is confidential and all recipients must keep it secure and protect it from loss or unauthorised access. This Certificate must only be used in accordance with the Disclosure and Barring Service's (DBS) Code of Practice and any other guidance issued by the DBS. Regular attention must be paid to the guidance in the fair use of the information in respect of those whose Certificate reveals a conviction or similar information. The DBS will monitor the compliance of Registered Bodies with this Code of Practice and other guidance.					

Appendix Five: Talk given at a local forum

50+Forum introduction. Helen Ogden.

Good morning everyone. I am currently studying for a PhD in Social Gerontology at Keele University. Some of you may know my supervisors Professors Mo Ray and Prof Mim Bernard and know that our area of research interest at Keele is about the social activities and relationships of older adults. I am particularly interested in people's relationships with their brothers and sisters. I am therefore looking for volunteers to take part in my research study, so please do come and see me in order to find out more.

In terms of who I would like to hear from, I am looking for adults who are aged 70 and over, and who also have at least one brother or sister who they would be prepared to ask to take part as well.

The reason I have chosen this topic is that there is a small amount of research that suggests that siblings become closer amongst this age group, due to a number of factors such as valuing being able to reminisce with someone who has known you over your life time, and because sometimes siblings become important again when other close relationships are lost. However, because these conclusions have been based on questionnaire findings for people of all ages, I would like to ask people directly what their siblings mean to them, by interviewing them and listening to what they have to say, rather than making assumptions.

Taking part will involve being interviewed by me, on an individual basis. I can either come to people's own homes, or we can agree on an alternative setting. I will ask you to talk about your sibling relationships from childhood to now, picking out the things that you feel are important about your sibling relationships.

Siblings can be full, half, step or adoptive siblings and even if you feel you don't have much in common with your siblings anymore I'd still like to hear from you. So, if you feel you might be interested or if you know of other people or groups who are not here today, but who might like to hear about the study please come and see me and collect a leaflet or an information sheet.

I'd love to speak to you. Thank you.

Appendix Six: Newsletter articles

A: Alumni mailing list

Research study about brothers and sisters

An Alumni, Helen Ogden, has returned to Keele to study for a PhD in Social Gerontology. Helen is seeking volunteers to take part in a research study about people's relationships with their brothers and/or sisters. She is seeking participants who are aged 70 and over and wondered if there are any Pioneers out there who would be interested in taking part in her research which is funded by Keele. Keele has a well-established centre of Social Gerontology (<http://www.keele.ac.uk/csg/>) and has produced some interesting and valuable work about the social and family lives of older adults. One of the Centre's aims is to "challenge traditional notions of ageing as problematic and burdensome."

Helen Ogden, who lives locally, is particularly interested in the relationship between brothers and sisters, because this is an area that has been studied far less than other family relationships. Helen feels that in order to understand more, it is really important to actually talk to people who are 70 and over about their relationship with their siblings over their life time, in order to capture the ups and downs of the relationship. Helen is currently looking for volunteers who would be willing to spare some time to talk to her about their relationship with their siblings. Because she needs to interview both brothers and sisters, she is looking for families where more than one sibling might want to take part. Siblings do not have to be full biological siblings as Helen feels that step, half and adopted siblings that people have been brought up with and have known since childhood might be just as important. Helen would want to interview each person separately in an agreed setting, which could be their own home, if they live locally, or could be via telephone or skype for those who are not local. The interview will take the form of a conversation so that people are free to choose what aspects of their sibling relationships people want to talk to Helen about.

Helen would like to include Keele Pioneers in her study, because research that has examined the link between academic achievement and how likely people are to maintain their sibling relationships is confusing. This is because it is based on questionnaires and rating scales, with how much practical support siblings offered each other being the focus of attention, rather than asking people to talk about the quality of their relationship over their lifetime. Helen is aiming to conduct an exploratory study that gathers rich meaningful data and is looking for people who would be happy to help her gain insight into this complex, but little researched family relationship.

If you feel that you and at least one of your brothers or sisters would be interested in finding out more about the study you can contact Helen directly by e-mail (e-mail address provided) or by telephone/text message (number provided). She would love to hear from you.

B: Trentham Local and Stone Local Community magazines

Research study about brothers and sisters

Helen Ogden, who lives locally and is currently studying for a PhD at Keele University is looking for volunteers to take part in a research study about older adults and their brothers and sisters. Helen is particularly interested in the relationship between brothers and sisters, because this is an area that has been studied far less than other family relationships. Helen feels that in order to understand more, it is really important to actually talk to people who are 70 and over about their relationship with their siblings over their life time, in order to capture the ups and downs of the relationship. Helen is currently looking for volunteers who are aged 70 and over, who would be willing to spare some time to talk to her about their relationship with their siblings. Because she needs to interview both brothers and sisters, she is looking for families where more than one sibling might want to take part. Siblings do not have to be full biological siblings as Helen is feels that step, half and adopted siblings that people have been brought up with and have known since childhood might be just as important. Helen would want to interview each person separately in an agreed setting, which could be your own home if preferred. The interview will take the form of a conversation so that people are free to choose what they want to talk to Helen about.

If you feel that you and at least one of your brothers or sisters would be interested in finding out more about the study you can contact Helen directly by e-mail (e-mail address provided) or by telephone/text message (number provided). She would love to hear from you.

Helen is particularly interested in hearing from anyone in the area, so if anyone belongs to a local community group for older adults and would like Helen to come along with more information and give a talk the group please do get in touch with her.

C: Parish newsletter and Beth Johnson foundation mailing list

Research study about brothers and sisters

A local mature student, Helen Ogden, who is based at Keele University is looking for volunteers to take part in an interview study about brothers and sisters. Helen is currently studying for a PhD in Social Gerontology, an area which focuses on the importance of peoples' social networks as they age. Helen is particularly interested in the relationship between brothers and sisters, because this is an area that has been studied far less than other family relationships. There is a small amount of research that seems to suggest for some people, siblings become more important to adults who are over 70. This finding has been based on comparing how adults of all ages rate their relationship with one of their siblings. The study suggests that siblings become closer because of factors such as shared life histories, the length of the relationship, and the importance of being able to reminisce with someone who has known you all of your life.

Helen feels that in order to understand more, it is really important to actually talk to people who are 70 and over about their relationship with their siblings over their life time, in order to capture the ups and downs of the relationship. Helen is currently looking for volunteers who are aged 70 and over, who would be willing to spare some time to talk to her about their relationship with their siblings. She needs to interview brothers and sisters, so is looking for families where more than one sibling might want to take part. Siblings do not have to be full biological siblings as Helen is feels that step, half and adopted siblings that people have been brought up with and know since childhood might be just as important. Helen would want to interview each person separately in an agreed setting, which could be your own home if preferred.

If you feel that you and at least one of your brothers or sisters would be interested in finding out more about the study you can contact Helen directly by e-mail (e-mail address provided) or by telephone/text message (number provided).

Appendix Seven: Data collection Proforma

Section 1: About you					
Name		Date of Birth		Place of Birth	
Marital Status (circle which applies)		Married / Divorced / Widowed / Single / Cohabiting			
What is your Ethnic origin?					
Parental Status (circle which applies)		Children / Step children / No Children / No step children			
Grandparent Status (circle which applies)		Grandchildren / No Grandchildren			
Living parents? (circle which applies)		Mother alive / Father alive			
Who lives with you? (e.g. spouse, oldest son etc.)					
<p>Do you regularly care for/look after any family member? (circle which applies) Yes/ No</p> <p>If yes, please state who (e.g. mother, spouse etc)</p> <p>Brief details of the type of care provided e.g. help with shopping, taking grandchildren to school</p>					
Section 2: About your living siblings					
How many siblings did you have?			How many living siblings do you have?		
Please provide the following details for each of your living siblings					
Sibling	Name	Date of Birth	Place of birth	Is your sibling Full/step/half/adoptive (please answer for each one)	Contact Details
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
Section 3: Proximity of family members who are important to you emotionally					
Which important family members do not live with you, but live within 2 miles?					
Which important family members live within 2 to under 5 miles away?					
Which important family members live within 5 to under 25 miles away?					
Which important family members live within 25 to 250 miles away?					
Which important family members live further than 250 miles away?					

Appendix Eight: Radio broadcast

A) Briefing information sent to Radio Stoke team

I am a mature, PhD student, based at Keele, who lives locally. I want to ask local people if they would be interested in taking part in my research study. My PhD is in social gerontology and social gerontologists are interested in the social relationships and social support networks of people as they age. As we age it can become even more important to be able to be around people who have known you when you were younger that you feel connected to. Also, as we get older, it does still tend to be family that we turn to for both practical and emotional support, so Social Gerontologists are often interested in people's family relationships. I think I do notice that there seem to be a lot of families who have remained close to each other here in Stoke, with generations still living near and I'm hoping that some of the listeners will come from those type of families who have kept in touch with what is happening in each other's lives.

I'd like to tell the listeners a bit more about the research study that I am going to be doing. My study is about the relationship between brothers and sisters for people who are over the age of 70. Basically, I am interested in what it means to them now, and also what it has meant to them over their entire lives from childhood, right up to now. I've chosen to look at siblings because there has been little research into the sibling relationship of older people to date. This is despite recognition that for a lot of people, their brothers and sisters might be the longest relationship they experience over a life time. A small amount of research does seem to suggest that for some people - those who have been widowed or divorced or have no children - that siblings take on more significance later in life. Despite it being noticed that a sibling might be a person's longest relationship there has been far more research into marital relationships and parent and adult child relationships. There has been a small amount of research based on questionnaire designs and looking at samples of people of all ages, that suggest that siblings become more important to each other later on in life - as other key relationships are lost and as people start to reminisce more. However, this research has not involved asking people over the age of 70 about their relationships with their own siblings.

I am interested in all types of sibling relationships because I want to look at a wide range of siblings from different backgrounds, different family sizes. I want to get as wide a mix as possible, so it does not matter how large the sibling group is, whether it is sisters only, brothers only or a mix of both brothers and sisters. I'd like people from different social class backgrounds, different ethnic groups, and a mix of families where they are all local and ones where some have lived away. I'm also interested in getting a mix of families in terms of location – so some from within the city areas of Stoke and some from the more rural parishes surrounding Stoke, such as Barlaston for example.

Taking part will mean being involved in one face to face interview with me personally. Although I want sibling groups to take part I will be interviewing people individually and all interviews will be confidential, so I'll not discuss anything that one family member says to me with any other family member. In terms of where the interviews take place, I would go to the person's home, or another agreed place, if they felt their home was not suitable. I'd like people to think of the interview as a conversation between them and me, rather than me firing off a list of pre-determined questions. This is because everyone's relationship is unique and I want people to have the opportunity to tell their own story in their own words. What I ask them will be influenced by what they say to me, and I want people to choose themselves what insights they would like to share. I will have some prompts and general questions to start people off, but as I've said it will be more like a conversation than a formal

interview. My ideal is carry out face to face interviews, but as families might be dispersed I can consider telephone and skype. I'd like ideally to get a mix of people - those who are close to their siblings and those who feel they have little in common anymore in order to try and get a handle on why some relationships drift and others don't.

From a personal point of view I have two sons who are close in age and very close to each other at the moment. This made me think that as a society we place great emphasis on the importance of siblings in childhood as companions, and as someone who can teach us how to relate to our peers, how to share, spur us on to compete etc., and I wonder why some siblings stay connected all their lives, often despite distance, busy lives etc and some don't. I think we all know brothers and sisters who seem really in tune and clearly mean a lot to each other and would say they are "best friends" and yet other people roll their eyes upwards and say: "we've not spoken for years"

Because my research is exploratory it is hard to say what I am hoping to find - it is rather like a blank canvas and I will write up my findings as part of my PhD thesis - depending on the findings I'd also be expecting to publicise them in other ways and publish in relevant journals. It is difficult to say at this stage where the research might lead, and perhaps I could come back in and update the listeners about it?

If any listeners think that they might be interested in taking part the best thing is to contact me directly so that I can give them more detailed information about the study. My e-mail address is (e-mail address provided) or you can phone (or text if you prefer) me on (number provided). Or write to me via the Centre for Social Gerontology, Claus Moser, Room CM0.18, University of Keele, Keele, STAFFS ST5 5BG. Anyone who expresses an interest will be sent a letter and an information sheet by me and I'll follow this up with a call when I'll answer any specific questions and make sure that people understand completely about what happens next.

B) Transcript of broadcast (20/9/2015)

SG Let's talk about family for a minute, because when you think of your family who do you think of? Immediately it might be your children, might be your grandchildren, it might be your own parents. Where does your brother or sister fit into that family, particularly if you're older? Where does your brother or sister fit into your life? Do you live close to them? Have you been separated by miles? My sister, I talk about her regularly on the show, she listens on-line some mornings, if you're listening Ali uhm, lives and works in Cornwall. My family, my parents still live in the house I left them in twenty odd years ago, near Worcester. So, we're quite spread out, we're quite disparate, and this is where some research being done at Keele University comes in. Helen Ogden's a mature student at Keele, she lives locally, she's with us this morning and is doing this research.

SG Morning Helen.

HO Good morning.

SG You want to find out about people and their siblings, and it's certain groups of people. Why is this interesting to you?

HO Well, first of all, the thing that makes the sibling relationship unique is actually the length of the relationship. As the population is ageing and people are living into their seventies, eighties and nineties, unfortunately that means for a lot of older people

they will actually lose other family members, and if I think about my own grandmother, she did actually out-live her sons, and she was the last remaining member of her family, and that will happen to quite a lot of the population, particularly women actually, and they may find that their sibling is that last remaining connection to their original family and the only person who's known them their entire life that they can reminisce with and share stories with and look at photographs with and share understanding with.

Family as we get older are important, both in terms of helping us out practically, and that task tends to fall to adult children, for those that have children, but there are a lot of people that don't have adult children, actually, and some research, a very limited amount of research so far, has shown that people value their siblings more for emotional support and sociability, so in that respect it is very, very unique and different from other family relationships.

SG I suppose if it's someone you grew up with and someone who's likely to be roughly the same age as you with similar experiences it's much easier to have that kind of understanding and empathy isn't it?

HO That's right.

SG than a different generation either up or down.

HO Yes, and there's been another bit of research that's actually shown that as people enter their seventies they actually become more dissatisfied with younger family members and more satisfied with people of their own age, and I suppose it makes sense around that sharing of common understanding and we've got a generation of people who are in their nineties that have gone through the Second World War and obviously that's quite a unique experience. In fact, I was talking to a pair of brothers the other day and no-one else can understand what they went through. It's only the two of them that can understand fully.

SG And this lack of understanding of younger generations when you get beyond seventy, is that, how does that manifest itself? Is it lack of patience with the grandchildren, is it that kind of thing that you see?

HO I think it's probably feeling a little bit, to use a phrase, "out of it" when the younger generation are talking, particularly – I mean I find it myself actually and I'm not a grandparent, I'm a parent, but you kind of lose that connection almost because people are interested in completely different things and there's a lack of understanding when we're talking about our own childhoods, about the sort of games that we played, and the people that we knew.

SG Oh, I introduced our son to Hopscotch last week and we'd forgotten what a great game it is. It's fantastic, really good, keeps you fit, does your maths. It's great, hand-eye co-ordination, it's wonderful. So, is this a good area to do this kind of research, because over the years on BBC Radio Stoke we've looked at how there isn't as much transience of people from around here and people might still be living around the corner from their brother or sister, for example, in their seventies or eighties.

HO I think it is actually and when I've been out and about, because my children are young, so I've been through a period of time of mixing with people at pre-school activities and I've met a lot of grandparents. Unfortunately, they're too young to take part in my study, but I have noticed this kind of connection with brothers and sisters

living nearby, so their children, unlike my own as my family is dispersed, they know all their aunts and uncles, their great-aunts and great-uncles, but having said that I am looking for diversity so I do want a mix of families that have maybe stayed close together, and families where some siblings have moved, maybe even to other countries because with modern technology I can interview people using Skype or over the phone. But I am looking for a mixture really of different types of families.

SG And what do you think you'll find. What are you looking for in this study?

HO Well that's the six-million-dollar question really, uhm, I don't want to pre-empt, I mean I could make certain assumptions, but I don't want to. I want...I am interested in people's individual life-stories. I'm not at that age myself so I can't really second guess what it will feel like to be sort of seventy or eighty, maybe having lost my husband, and my children having moved away. I don't really know. I don't want to pre-empt that. I want people to tell me their own stories and what they feel is important. Obviously there are some issues that I've already picked up, that we've just mentioned actually, such as people moving away geographically, uhm, other family members dying may bring people closer together, those kind of things, uhm, but the interview itself will be very much an open interview where I will ask people to tell me about their siblings, what they've meant to them over their entire lives, what they mean to them now, and I will want them to pick out events that they feel are important or other influences that may have affected their sibling relationship.

SG Sounds more like a chat than a formal interview then?

HO Yeh, I would like to think of it like a conversation really between myself and the person that I'm interviewing, and although I'm looking for groups, part of my research design is the fact that a relationship is - can be taken from many perspectives, so I do want to interview more than one person from the same family, but having said that I'm not going to get them in a room together. I think that worries some people

SG (Laughs) Haven't spoken for thirty years.

HO And obviously (laughs) That's right. I won't be interviewing them together. I will be interviewing them individually and treating their interviews individually. They may not even mention the same things and obviously they can't make any assumptions that some-one else has told me something. And I can't discuss anything that's been said to me with anyone else. I'd just like to reassure people about that. So, I think even the closest people are going to have things that they may not have openly discussed with their sibling that they may tell me. So yes, it will all be confidential, and I've got ethical approval and I'm CRB checked and everything, so nothing to worry about

SG Fantastic. So, who can take part then? Who are you looking for?

HO I'm primarily looking for people who are at least seventy. It doesn't matter if their siblings are younger, as long as I've got one family member that is seventy or over, and to be honest, because I'm trying to look at a period of life where people have been retired for a long time and they may have - other family members may not live close to them anymore, I like to say (laughs) the older the better really, as long as somebody feels they're able to take part and they're prepared for me to be there for maybe an hour or so listening to their stories, that would be fine, but it's seventy or over and they've got to have at least one brother or sister that would also like to take part. So, I will be asking people to contact their brothers and sisters and obviously if they're local that's quite easy uhm but I've said if they are living in another country

for instance, because I know somebody with a sibling in Australia we'll try and work out a way to do that, using technology.

SG It's going to be a late night for you?

HO It might be (laughs).

SG Fantastic. How do people get in touch then? First of all, I suppose they need to check with their sibling that they're both willing to do it.

HO That's right.

SG And then what do they do?

HO They can either phone me and I've got a mobile number that is set up specifically for the study. That number is [...] or as I like to remember it myself [...] That's quite easy to remember I find.

SG Yes, I wrote it down like that when you told me yesterday. Brilliant uhm have you got an e-mail address as well?

HO Yes, they can e-mail me and its [...] and I'll just repeat that, so its [...]

SG Fantastic.

HO Or, if they haven't got access to e-mail or they're not really familiar with mobile phones they can always write to me and they could write to me via the University.

SG Right and we've got the details there for them?

HO Yes.

SG So I'll give out our number because lots of people remember it, because we mention it often enough [...]. Helen, I think it's going to be a fascinating piece of research. Thanks for coming in and talking to us about it. Let us know how you get on, but you can't reveal any of the secrets?


HO No.

SG Which is what I'm really interested in, and thanks so much for coming in this morning, and having a chat to us.

HO Thank you.

Appendix Nine: Leaflets and posters

A. Leaflet

<div><div>Keele University Centre for Social Gerontology</div></div> <div>Volunteers needed for a study about brothers and sisters</div> <div>Are you aged 70 or over?</div> <div>Do you have at least one brother or sister?</div> <div>Would you be willing to help me find out how important siblings are over peoples' life times?</div> <div>If you think that you AND one of your siblings would be interested in speaking to me I would love to hear from you.</div> <div>Why do I want to study siblings?</div> <div><p>My name is Helen Ogden, and I am studying for a PhD at Keele University. As part of my research project I have chosen to study the relationship between older adult siblings.</p></div> <div><p>Siblings can be an important source of emotional support, and an important person to reminisce with due to a life time of shared memories. Other studies have found this is particularly true for those who lack other forms of family support. However, not many researchers have actually asked older people to talk to them about their siblings. I think it is an important relationship to study because for many adults it may be their most long-lasting family relationship.</p></div>	<div>What does taking part involve?</div> <div>If you decide that you want to take part I will give you an information sheet which gives detailed information about the study. I will also be happy to answer any further questions that you might have. I have given some brief details below:-</div> <div><p>If you decide that you would like to take part I will also need at least one of your siblings to also take part.</p></div> <div><p>The study will involve taking part in an interview.</p></div> <div><p>I will record the interview and take some notes to help me remember things.</p></div> <div><p>All information that you give me will be confidential. I will not discuss anything that you say with anyone else, including your other family members.</p></div> <div>If you are interested please do contact me. I will be happy to give you more information about the study and answer any questions that you might have.</div> <div>Please phone/text me on (number provided) or e-mail me: (e-mail address provided)</div>
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B. Poster



Keele University
Centre for Social Gerontology

**Volunteers needed for a study
about brothers and sisters**

Are you aged 70 or over?

Do you have at least one brother or sister?

**Would you be willing to help me find out how important
siblings are over peoples' life times?**

**If you think that you AND one of your siblings would be
interested in speaking to me I would love to hear from
you.**

What to do if you are interested

**If you are interested please contact me. I will be happy to give
you more information about the study and answer any
questions you might have.**

**Please phone/text me on (number provided) or email me on:
(e-mail address provided)**

Helen Ogden, PhD Candidate
Centre for Social Gerontology
Claus Moser, Room CM0.18
Keele University, Staffs, ST5 5BG

Appendix Ten: Extracts from my field journal

A) 19/11/2015: Hilary Coal, telephone interview

Extract 1

During the interview with Hilary the sense of me as a researcher having some common ground did arise and I feel as if I was chipping in a bit more than I normally do, because the common ground made me feel at ease with her – it will be interesting when I do the analysis to see if my perception about how much I said was correct, or whether it was more that I was thinking about the parallels as the interview went along. I did feel that her perspective as an older sister to a younger brother, there only being the two of them, and them moving around due to their father's occupation was so similar to my experience. Even when she talked about going to boarding school because of moving schools a lot, I shared that understanding of the why. My parents talked about it, but decided not to send me, and my father managed to ensure that my secondary education was not disrupted.

I also understood when she talked about her brother not initiating contact and how his wife might affect that too. When she talked about her mother's attitude towards her when she was a bit older and her brother was small – she felt that her mother got her father to look after her and talked about how her having Asthma as a child might have affected the family dynamics. I almost chipped in at this point, not as a sibling but a parent of a child who has Asthma. You feel guilty for spending more time with the Asthmatic child and therefore perhaps what she felt was her mum loving her brother more was her mum over compensating because in a mum's eyes you feel like you spend a lot of time caring for the ill child, but perhaps the child does not see the caring as being "their share" of the mother's time. I'm always conscious of this because as a parent you feel you are neglecting the well child and the well child seems easier to be around sometimes, just because you are not worrying.

Extract 2

There were some areas of the interview where I read a little into things that she said and wonder now whether the interview with her brother will shed any light onto it. Firstly, she seemed to say "I wonder if Liam will remember this" and "I wonder what Liam thinks" It may just be her taking an interest in his opinion but it also conveys a sense of their separation, or lack of recent communication? I was also curious about Liam coming down alone for the Golden Wedding. She talked about him being very supportive after their parents died, but she talks totally about practical support. When I contrast this to the sister-sister pairs comments about support - something along the lines was said about "we clung to each other and said we are orphans" - it just seems very different, and there was far less emotion and emphasis in this interview.

Extract 3

It is interesting to compare this to my last interview - Gareth Silver - his interview made me feel quite emotional in a couple of places, when he talked about his brother being snatched and not seeing him again until he was eighteen, and the part when he describes how they got back in touch, and also when he talks about the sister than he should have had. Quite a different interview with Hilary to most of the other interviews really. She remembers a lot, but there seems to be less intimacy?

B) 6/11/2015: Anthea Green, Face to Face interview

Extract 1

I told Anthea after her interview that I'd had a preconceived idea that she would be a very good interviewee and I was right. She ran through her narrative with virtually no prompting at all and answered all the questions that I might have raised myself. Her interview is unique so far in that it is the first time I've interviewed one of a sibling pair that have always been a pair and not reduced via sibling loss. Thus, more intensity comes through and more memories centred around the sibling rather than "all of us" or "our parents". There is honesty over times of strife and, interestingly, an account of not feeling too close during early childhood but developing a more intense emotional bond in early adolescence which has remained strong throughout life. Anthea in some ways fits the stereotypical idea of someone who is likely to be closer to a sibling – a woman who is widowed and lives alone. However, Anthea is a lively bubbly vivacious type of person and is not without a large social network and some other family support.

Extract 2

I feel less inclined to write masses of field notes about Anthea because she says it all so well in her own narrative. She was just recovering from an operation and made some remark about the state of the place, but really it looked clean and tidy enough to me. It was a warm modern bungalow with a small driveway and her car was parked on the drive. There was a lounge, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. There were photographs and she had the same photo frame as someone else had with word 'family' on it. Family was important to Anthea, but she talked more about the family unit (parents and sister) and her family (husband and two sons). Two of her grandchildren are adopted and she also talked about it being a shame that one of her daughters-in-law was not able to have children.

Extract 3

It is quite interesting too, that to date this is my longest interview, and as I mention earlier it is the only one so far where the participant only has one sibling to talk about. It is interesting therefore that Anthea has far more to say about her one sibling than some others have had to say about 2 to 9 siblings! Perhaps this might be something to think about during analysis, particularly if it arises again. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that this account of sisterhood fits exactly with my preconceived ideas of what having a sister is like, based on my own experiences of having friends with a sister - and I do mean sisters when they are a pair of sisters. I've noticed similar patterns of extreme closeness and affection, understanding etc., springing to each other's defence, confiding about husbands, boyfriends, dates etc., but also the potential for clashes and falling outs from time to time. I was also expecting more of this type of narrative "she said to me, I said to her" and have perhaps been surprised that this did not happen in some of the larger families where I would have expect that to occur, or even observations of other siblings within the family saying things that stuck in people's minds - but so far the larger families seem to blur all their memories together, something I had not foreseen - the smaller and medium siblings groups seem to recount more specific memories.

I did feel very at ease with Anthea, and she had a very calm clear way of speaking and was very bubbly and positive in her manner. As I read the transcript I can hear her voice clearly resonating, her tone and the parts where she almost laughs at herself make me laugh out loud when I read the transcript. This interview was very enjoyable and it does put a smile on my face when I read it.

C) 27/11/2015 Jack Scarlett, telephone

Extract 1

During the interview, Jack told me about some interesting family history and it did make me reflect on what a rich source of data about other topics this project has been, and that really most of us have interesting stories to tell, but so few of us get the chance to tell them. As Jack said prior to the interview who doesn't want to talk about themselves? I did feel saddened at times by his family background and the way that history views people who made difficult choices during times of historical importance that at the time are not perhaps fully understood. He talks about emigrating to "escape" the past and having to detach himself from his family sometimes - there is privilege there in his life but also a sense of shame perhaps, and on reflection he seems to realise that his sibling relationships could have formed differently. Extended family links are lacking and there is a sense of their family unit being quite isolated. He mentions his parents were "anti-social" - were they anti-social or were they defensive/rejected as a result of their past?

Extract 2

I think that during the interview there are times when I could not help showing how surprised I was as his narrative evolved. I'd not been expecting some of the things he told me at all, such as the fact that he emigrated, and got married so soon after graduation. Obviously, I would not have predicted his family background at all, but it explained why his accent was a mix of Canadian and well-spoken English at times. He started off in quite a privileged background and certainly his schooling was much more privileged than I had expected and that appears to have not been disrupted by the change in circumstances, but then he does mention that his father was lent loans that were of an order of magnitude that he was never able to repay.

Extract 3

Like my previous interview with Liam, this interview gives quite a different perspective on the sibling relationship and at times Jack uses language that I'd not really have expected [...] It is clear that there is ambivalence but it is almost ambivalence *in time* - he is having to reconcile his earlier feelings to his later feelings which are much warmer, but he can still remember how he felt earlier in life and how he was influenced and there is a lot of regret. There is an element of him viewing women differently to men earlier in life which is due to his upbringing, for example, at some point he almost says "of course not because she was a girl" or words to that effect and I get the sense that his parents treated sons and daughters differently when he talks about his younger sister being trapped, and his younger sister breaking away. It will be interesting to see what his siblings say!

Appendix Eleven: Transcription conventions

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

- (.5) The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second
- (.) A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk less than two tenths of a second
- .hh A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the in-breath
- hh An 'h' indicates an out-breath. The more 'h's the longer the breath
- A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word sound
- : Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching
- () Empty parentheses indicate the presence of an unclear fragment on the tape
- . A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone. It does not necessarily indicate the end of a sentence
- , A comma indicates a continuing intonation
- ? A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question
- ↑↓ Pointed arrows indicate a marked rising or falling intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift

Under Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis

CAPITALS With the exception of proper nouns, capital letters indicate a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it

= The 'equals' sign indicates contiguous utterances

[] Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk

A more detailed description of these symbols can be found in Atkinson, M and Heritage, J (ed.) (1984) *Structures of Social Action*. Cambridge: CUP

Appendix Twelve A: Example of a Memo

Name: Memos \\ mothering role

Created on: 4/05/2016

Created by: HO

Modified on: 7/7/2016

Modified by: HO

MOTHERING ROLE

On re-reading Eric's comments about his relationship with his older sisters a couple of things strike me. Firstly, he seems to be indicating that his older sisters in some way might **compensate for the loss of his parents**, in that he mentions they take on a **mothering role**. Secondly, he talks about **reciprocal support exchange** and for him this is **a change in role**, which he seems to **willingly take on**. In fact, at times he takes **pride** in the role, talking about **satisfaction and trust**. What seems to emerge from Eric's narrative is that he feels **comfortable with both changes**. Perhaps because he was **brought up by older sisters**, sliding back into that relationship where they mother him seems quite natural. Conversely, due to the love and care received earlier in life he is **quite willing to help** them now that **they need his support**. That he refers as himself as a **shoulder to lean** on indicates that he provides **emotional support**, as well as the practical support mentioned earlier in his narrative.

On reviewing the coding for Anthea's interview, I thought I'd re-visit this earlier memo regarding the **'mothering role'** as I recalled Eric mentioning it. Anthea's description of her sister **replacing her mother's** trust is similar. She said

When it's your older sister they replace your mothers err trust don't they when you come to think about it?

Again, a younger sibling finding **comfort** in an older sibling and indications of a **compensatory mechanism** in later life? Note however that the **foundations** are quite different. Carolyn was by no means a caretaker sibling for Anthea earlier in life, quite the opposite. However now in later life Carolyn does worry about Anthea and talks about **watching over her**.

Linked Item

Internals\\Int 3_EB

Nodes:\\ roles and responsibilities\\role changes

Nodes:\\support\\reciprocation\\role reversal

EB But to me they're everything and I know it's been quite a few years since me mum and dad passed away but with 'aving older sisters especially they sort of take on that mothering role even though now I'm sixty seven err I can still be mothered a bit err but I also take on the other role where I've become I don't know whether err where I become their shoulder to lean on and that that gives me satisfaction sometimes as they trust me to help with their problems you know I I only put it down to that fact that that me elder brother he's very very ill he he he's got cancer

Twelve B: Example of a coding definition/revision memo

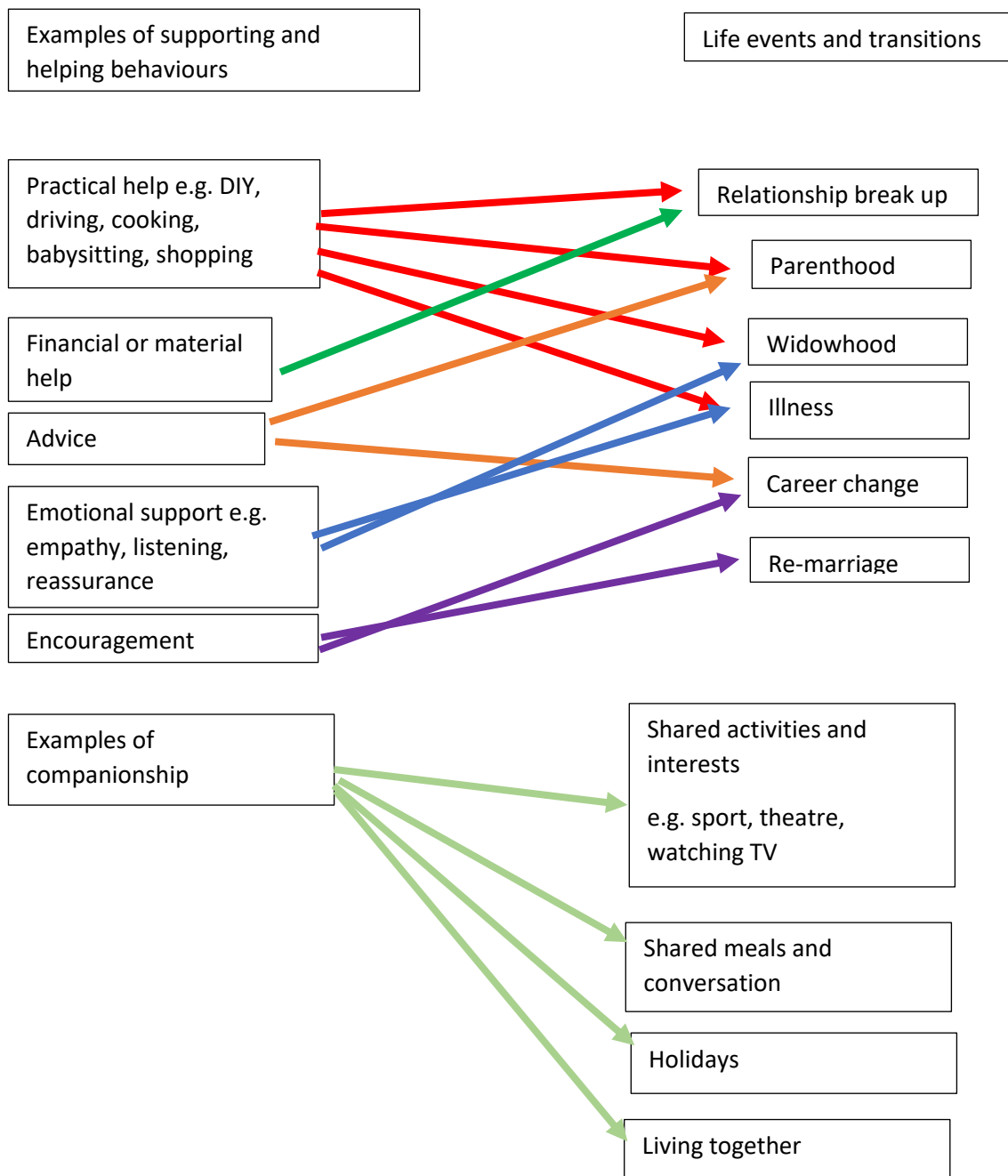
Memo 8.1 The interplay between emotional closeness and emotional distance

Having returned to the notion that I originally conceived as a sibling being 'labelled'/typecast in some way and noted how this labelling initially seemed to stem from parents, rather than siblings, I decided to revise it. I think that the difficulty I first had was that this idea of being labelled or typecast, came from Anita White's interview and she used the term labels herself. Her narrative in which she describes Annabelle as aloof and detached was reinforced by her siblings having the same view, that Annabelle could almost be from "*another family*" to the rest of them. Therefore, in my mind there was this anomaly to address. Four siblings who were, to use their terminology, "*engaged and interested*" with each other, and one who was mysteriously aloof.

I think having come across this again in other families, I began to build a picture of certain siblings being set apart from the others. My initial coding reveals a range of terms used to describe particular siblings in this way such as "*virtually absent*", "*disinterested*", "*a non-entity*", "*indifferent*", "*detached*", "*the one who went over the wire*", "*not like the rest of us*" and "*the Black Sheep*". However, one of my criticisms of Gold's typology was that it is too static and does not account for the possibility of change. I realised that I was in danger of doing the same thing, in describing particular siblings in this way. It struck me when re-reading Anita White's transcript that in one part of her narrative she describes her emotionally close sibling, Anthony, as "*not available in that way*". This resonated with me for some reason and I thought about the fact that she is talking about emotional distance and then I started to think about the interplay between emotional closeness and emotional distance and realised that this is a much better way of thinking about it than static labels. Having noticed this and re-read some of the interviews, the participants' own words then stood out far more and I noticed that for instance Anita and Anthony refer to it as this, in fact Anthony does state that once she knew she was dying Annabelle "*worked hard to overcome the emotional distance that she had conspired to create.*" This fits in with my revision of the entire coding group to consider emotional distance rather than detachment (which sounds more permanent and less flexible). Similarly, the "*virtually absent*" Jack Scarlett has also changed and drawn closer to all his siblings, particularly Karen: "*I love her now*" and "*we have become better and better friends as life has gone on*". My next step is to explore this further with the other groups and see if there are descriptions of other siblings who have become emotionally close after being distant or vice-versa, and this supports ebb and flow in emotional closeness across the life-course too.

Appendix Thirteen: diagramming to assist coding and concepts

Appendix Thirteen A: Initial Diagram showing how different types of support and examples of life events or transitions where types of sibling support were exchanged



Appendix Thirteen B: Handwritten diagram to assist development of conceptual arguments



Appendix Fourteen: Excerpts from interview transcripts

Interview 15	Frank Black	9/11/2015	Telephone
Excerpt 1			
HO	Okay Frank so I'd like you to begin by telling me about what it felt like, growing up with your brothers and sisters, and any sort of childhood or adolescent memories that you have of your time with them, that would be great.		
FB	I just always remember err growing up within a family group. Obviously err being born as was, at the end of The War I didn't have to suffer the same sort of austerity measures, that perhaps Carl and Evie did growing up, but I've always grown up knowing err that I'm part of err a family and cared for and sharing. I can't remember any situations where I said 'ooh no I don't speak to my brother' or 'I don't never speak to them, never see them' or anything like that. So, a, a lot of it is things that I can't remember that really strike home to me.		
Excerpt 2			
FB	I think, you know, growing up within the family and as I did, being the third one and then others coming along, there's always been something interesting or exciting happening as I've grown up that I've really enjoyed err growing up in a family. The things you can remember you know, things you can share, you know, the grief, the excitement of things and things like that, uhm. Sharing, I always remember coz with food or anything like that, if there was anything in the house and there was enough to go round you could have it, whatever it was. But there always had got to be enough to go round whoever was in the house. I shared, err for a time, a bedroom with Carl which was quite good uhm, you know. There's lots of things err, as a lad, as you're growing up, and advice you can get and err just generally err talking to, err and of course, you meet other people as they bring their girlfriends and boyfriends err home. Evie's always been very supportive uhm, but then as I say as the others have come along they've all become part of the group and, you just always yeh I mean we've had disagreements, but never fallouts, if you know what I mean, uhm and that's the things that I can remember most.		
Excerpt 3			
HO	I'm not sure the sequence of events actually in terms of who sort of left home and all that so if you could tell me a little bit about that time when you all maybe started to separate sort of physically		
FB	I think yes it was arou- uhm, I think when sort of Carl first left because he really, we first missed him if you like, when he went into the err the Army. And Carl had to do National Service and uhm of course he was away err doing that, so that was real- not a yeh, shock really, I sponse, you know, suddenly getting used to him not being there to sort of constantly talk to and things like that, although we did still see him a fair bit. Err then Evie got married of course and, and moved away. So, I think we, we've, not universally where people moved away when, uhm err, they were married as such you know, so err it was just a-but again being a larger family, as Carl went, then there were the younger ones to sort of- they were growing up as well- to talk to and err, and be with. So, err and I think again we've always		

been fairly close and in touch so, you know, you haven't I wouldn't say I've greatly missed it as such.

HO So when you actually left home where- did you live nearby?

FB err I did yes. err I left home err when I was married I was err close quite close uhm there. Well we still used to, I think, it was Saturdays then, every Saturday we used to go down and err it, you know, it's always been a bit uhm a meeting house when mum and dad were alive, and now we're fortunate that err my two brothers actually live in the same err house, so it's always been a meeting place, if you like. We'd go down say on a Friday, and see mum and dad and the children that were still at home

Excerpt 4

HO Yes so in terms of why you think I mean your family I can't think of a good word to use but successful- you all get on uhm have you had any thoughts about why? Uhm what would you put that down to? Do you think it's your parents or do you just think it's your personalities are compatible or circumstances?

FB I contribute a lot of it to the parents I mean the way we were brought up to be with each other, to share, to look after each other and all look out for each other and things like that You know I mean err if we'd have been, I don't think it would have been tolerated if we'd have been having big arguments in the house at home or things like that. So, I've always attributed it to just the general err bringing up really, both parents and the rest of the family members, you know. You err get on and share so err you know. So, I think parents were err a big influence. Carl and Evie have been quite err a big influence coz cos they, through the err The War years, and saw the hardships and everything then err and it's always been a lot easier for us, I expect, that have come along since uhm. So yeh, I think err Carl and Evie's always yeh been quite a big influence.

Excerpt 5

HO Have there been any times in your life where your support from your siblings has been particularly significant maybe even more significant than any other sort of family member. Can you think of anything?

FB Err uhm well for me they've just always been there. I think the err, quite err recently I had to go through a short course of chemotherapy uhm, so it was nice that they were texting the wife to see how I was going on, asking her how she was, came to see me and things like that. So, err yes, at time like that, when they're err, they've all been a great support uhm. We lost err a brother to cancer as well, that traumatic uhm, I think then err, the strange thing is you can get together, it's how you can get support from silence isn't it? You know you can, there can be a group of the family all together and you can not be saying much, but getting a lot of support. Uhm, so yes, I've felt there have been times when, and things like that, where err they have been a big support yeh.

Excerpt 6

HO Do you think that friendships can be the same or do you think no siblings a special relationship there's something more about the sibling than there is about a friend?

FB I still think there is something more about siblings really. I mean we err, I've always considered them you know being friends, as such if you like, but err uhm no I still think

there is something, you know. Whatever has happened, whatever road they've taken or what, there's still something err important about them I think. I still think family ties err is very important

HO And what would you put that down to?

FB I think, I expect it's we've grown up together uhm. Personally I've always got a lot of strength and enjoyment from it uhm you know, and it's something I've tried to get into my own family err you know, that we all remain friends, we never fall out, we're all close uhm, you know certain things like that, its I think you can get a lot of strength comfort and that from it, yeh.

HO And as you've got older have you felt closer to your siblings or do you feel it's stayed the same throughout your life?

FB I think it's stayed the same. err I can't say you know I particularly got more close to anyone. I've always considered that we've had a fairly err good relationship with everybody. So its just remained, err, it's just really constant, it's always there you get comfort I think.

Interview 14 Anthea Green 6/11/2015 Face to Face

Excerpt 1

AG But what happened was uhm I really should have gone into the Sixth Form, but I didn't and err so I did Secretarial work instead and me sister said 'there's a job going.' She was working at Wedgewood at the time and she said 'there's a vacancy in our office.' She said 'why don't you come?' I said 'oh' coz I was, well I went on the wrong course I messed about six months of me life. I made a big mistake. Went on the wrong course. Realised I was on the wrong course, then I thought 'what shall I do?' So, I went for this interview and so that was lovely coz we actually worked together

HO She suggested that you came and worked with her?

AG Oh yeh. She was very, very protective, very. 'I'll look after out little Anth' and there was a girl in the office and err she was not nice to me at all and me sister immediately, her hackles were raised and she took her on one side and she said 'listen here you, you leave my sister alone. She's not your Junior' you know.

Excerpt 2

AG Then I got married I say at eighteen and she was my bridesmaid obviously, err and then really the closest period of our life was when we started to have our children and we were both married five years before we started our families and uhm during that period, I'm going back a bit here though, err during that period Carolyn had to finish at [...] because of the travelling and everything and she got a job with [...] in Quality Control. Office work and coz then I was travelling by train err and it was just all bed and work. We'd got a flat and it was quarter to seven before we were sitting down for our teas, coz it was time to go to bed, get up and go back work, so I looked for another job and sh-and I ended up working for a small firm that was on the same premises as [...].

HO Oh right?

AG So again we were back to travelling to work together, seeing each other at dinner time err uhm yeh seeing a lot of her then, and uhm that was nice.

Excerpt 3

AG While I was pregnant Carolyn was pregnant with her second one. She didn't tell anyone. No. This is Carolyn. She didn't tell a soul because this is my first child and I wanted all the attention

HO oh that's nice isn't it?

AG I wasn't saying I wanted all the attention.

HO No but it's nice of her?

AG She said, and she had to actually sit with me knowing that I was in labour, thinking 'oh God I've got to go through this in fifteen weeks' time'. There's just sixteen weeks difference between the two.

HO So she was there when you had your first child?

AG I was in labour I-she-no. Nobody was with you. She had to go. Everybody had to go

HO Oh yeh I'd forgotten it was different then wasn't it?

AG Yeh, yeh, but when I was carrying Edward err she looked after me, because I had a scare uhm. I had a few spots of blood, you know and she looked after me. I stayed in bed. She was very good and we saw each other every single day when we'd got our children.

HO Wow

AG We had a routine that I would go down to her house and then from her house we would walk into the town. One day we used to go to the clinic, another day we'd go to the library, another day we'd do this, another day we'd shop and we always ended up meeting me mum from work and going for a cup of tea with me mum, and then it was time to go home and get the hubbies' teas on, but we saw each other every single solitary day. We share - each Christmas err we took it in turns doing Christmas Day. She did it one year, I did it the following year, err and then mum always did Boxing Day and uhm we never wanted anybody else other than our own families, you know. We just didn't bother.

Excerpt 4

AG Of course we didn't have a phone them days. Didn't even have a landline so to ring her we used to have to go down to the err public phone box. She wrote every single solitary week and I wrote to her every single solitary week. When she was on holiday she always wrote me a letter, even if they only went away for a week, she always wrote a letter and err that was a big adjustment, a big adjustment, and uhm so it- it- we got then so we only saw them uhm err at holiday times, you see. Which was Easter and err the Potters Holidays and err we used to stay with them, but then the lads got too big to be all bunking together.

HO Yeh that's the problem isn't it?

CG So yeh. We started err having err a flat on the front err and then, you know, seeing them up there. But err we never grew apart, that was me big worry, that we'd grow apart, but we never grew apart and uhm and then, as I say, because me mum was taken ill and err

mum died. Carolyn came up and stayed up 'ere, stayed with me dad, 'coz mum and dad had err given their home up then and moved into sheltered

HO oh so your mum died before your dad?

AG Yeh. Yes, and then err dad was four years on his own. He was eighty when he died, but uhm we never ever, you know, like you know, never sort of squabbled. I remember neither mum or dad left a will but we didn't bother we just 'ad a look what was in the bank and said 'right okay that's yours, that's mine, pay the bills out of it what's left'

Excerpt 5

AG But, as I say, uhm the first person I'd turn to in trouble 'ud be me sister. When my son and his wife, their marriage broke, up the first person I wanted was me sister and I was ringing trying to track her down at work 'ohhhh dear ohhhh no' Ha, ha ha, but she's ever so, she's very kind my sister is. She always remembers if you've got an appointment at the doctors or something. There'll always be a text 'thinking about you today Anth 'ope it does well' and you know, all that sort of thing. She's very upset that she hasn't been able to come up to see me while I've been in the state I've been in. They just can't afford it, it's as simple as that err. They have not got any surplus money at all err and of course I can't put them up now coz we haven't got, you know, the spare bedrooms and it would mean them having going for bed and breakfast and all that and the petrol money and the diesel money. Then James's four by four isn't in very good nick

Excerpt 6

HO So at the sort of present time do you phone each other? how often do you see each other?

AG We have an hour every Sunday that's our hour. Eight till nine. If anything happens and I'm out err I'll text her and say 'can I ring later I'm still at Olives or still at the kids or wherever' uhm and like this week, I've rung her in the week, which is not very often, but I rang her to tell her that me physio had been really pleased with me, because she'd been so worried about me uhm. She said 'I'm going grey' uhm and I text her and said 'I've got good news the physio's really pleased with me' and she says 'oh thanks for ringing' you know. And I text her two or three times a week really, and I mean that's great. She still, she always wrote every week. She always wrote me a letter. She's wonderful, she ought to have been an authoress. She'll err she'll describe the sunsets and she'll describe the sea as doing this and all that. She's very descriptive uhm but the- now that the e-mails, she e-mails more than writes, coz with the postage and everything, I mean it's ridiculous isn't it? but err wherever I go if I'm only out for a day trip. I always send my sister a card. A postcard.

Excerpt 7

AG She was very, very, supportive to me when I lost me husband. Yeh, very supportive when I lost Kev uhm, just by being there really and uhm, you know, listening, listening to me uhm. They actually came over, it was bitterly cold err it was the March and she said 'we're coming' and I said 'oh Carolyn it's a good way' she says 'no' and they were here for nine o'clock in the morning so at least she could speak to him and we didn't think he was going to die, we really didn't think he was going to die...

Appendix Fifteen: Individual pen portraits, grouped by family.

*Families are presented alphabetically. Within each family, individuals are placed in interview order. The sibling who made **initial contact** is highlighted in **red**.*

The Bennett siblings

Abigail Bennett

Abigail is widowed and lives alone. Her brother Mark, sons, grandchildren and nieces are important family relationships. I interviewed Abigail at home. She has mobility problems and uses a Zimmer frame. She was neatly dressed, welcoming, intelligent, and endearing. Abigail recalled her excitement at the news she was to have a baby brother. She helped her mum look after Mark and admired him. She recalls how he faded to a helpless little skeleton during an illness. She comforted him when he had nightmares, listened to him read, tied his shoe laces, and generally helped. She introduced him to music and admires how accomplished a pianist he became. She expresses guilt about not being there for him during his later school years after she left home and married. After Mark joined the RAF he transformed from her 'baby brother' to a 'man in uniform'. Once Mark married she recalls family gatherings and sharing the experience of parenthood, although contact lessened when building careers. Mark moved nearby when he re-married. When her husband died, Mark was caring for his ill wife. After his wife died they became closer. When Abigail was seriously ill Mark was extremely supportive. When Mark was in hospital, Abigail felt helpless as more support occurs now from him to her. Her relationships with Mark has been important throughout life. She feels protective towards him. She worries about one of them losing the other.

Mark Bennett

Mark is a widower and lives alone. His important family relationships are his children and Abigail. I interviewed Mark at home. He was in good health following a recent hospital stay. He was intelligent, articulate and genuine. He spoke with enthusiasm about Abigail. Mark recalls Abigail teaching him; introducing him to music; and being influential. He recalls sharing bath-times, interests, and their mother's affection. He felt left out when Abigail developed different interests. The age gap and gender difference meant that she developed a close friendship, so their lives diverged. After Mark established his career they met opportunistically at their parents' house. Abigail's husband was difficult, but this did not affect Mark's relationship with her. They became close when they had their children in a 'stepwise manner' and Abigail got on well with both Mark's wives. Mark attributed their good relationship to personality. He is laid back, she is a worrier. They are both extroverts who enjoy company. Their relationship has changed since contact became daily. His new role is to watch over her and he feels increasing responsibility. He is empathetic about her ill-health. Currently he does not need support from Abigail as he is an independent person. During some periods of his life their relationship has been extremely important e.g. childhood. At other times, it was less important e.g. when were busy with families and careers.

The Brown siblings

Eric Brown

Eric is married and lives with his wife. Eric's wife, children, grandchildren, all of his siblings, and nieces and nephews that he was raised with, are important family relationships. I interviewed Eric at home, with his wife present. Eric was welcoming with an easy manner. He displayed humour, and spoke with love and affection about his siblings. Eric described a family-oriented upbringing. Their loving parents encouraged openness and honesty. Some siblings were age-peers and playmates, whereas others helped bring him up alongside their children. Eric describes a happy, safe, and secure upbringing. Sharing meals and conversations was, and is, an activity around which family relationships revolve. On leaving home the Brown siblings established a routine of returning to the parental home every Saturday, with their children. Eric feels equally close to all of his siblings. Eric recalls his sisters providing a model of caring, supportive behaviour. He sees his nearby widowed sisters three times a week, sometimes more when they gather for meals and conversation. His sisters are supportive every day and take on a motherly role. The Browns enjoy getting together as a group. They include spouses and share *'times of joy together as much as we grieve together.'* A role reversal is apparent now that Eric is a trusted helper and advisor to his older sisters. He concludes that they have never been prepared to put each other down because they love each other.

Charlotte Brown

Charlotte Brown is widowed and lives alone. Her siblings, children and grandchildren are important family relationships. I interviewed Charlotte at home. Charlotte had a warm, friendly manner and good sense of humour and her interview flowed naturally. Charlotte's lasting impression of growing up in a large family was of never feeling alone. They shared everything, did chores together, went to Church, took holidays together, and played together. She felt safe and secure. Once her eldest siblings married, there were six of them at home. She had a peer-like relationship with her brothers, but Felicity was her "surrogate mum." Charlotte felt separate from her siblings when, at Grammar school, she mixed in different social circles. Once she married Charlotte joined the tradition of meeting her siblings regularly at her parent's house. Charlotte has kept her siblings as "lifelong friends". As Charlotte and her sisters lost their husbands contact increased and they started going on holiday together. Increased socialisation between the widowed sisters and Eric is ongoing, beginning as support and now about being together as siblings. Charlotte never feels short of anyone to talk to. Her sibling relationships are reciprocal, particularly with Felicity, who Charlotte is 'paying back' for earlier care. Charlotte has particular siblings who she is closer to, although recently she has reconnected to other siblings. Charlotte is proud of her family. She feels it is 'us against the world.'

Diana Brown

Diana, who divorced early in life, has lived alone since her second partner of thirty-four years died. Diana's important family relationships are her siblings. I interviewed Diana at home. She was in poorer health than her siblings. Diana grew up during the War, originally within a group of four sisters who played outdoor games and were in gangs of neighbourhood children. Her childhood was happy, and her parents were brilliant. As the family expanded, roles changed. The elder sisters shared chores and caring duties. Diana

felt close to all of her siblings although she fell out with her eldest sister once. Diana left home when she married but visited regularly. Her eldest sister looked after her children while she worked. Increased closeness with age has resulted from losing other relationships and realising that you have to love those you still have. Diana is afraid of losing the others. Diana receives practical and emotional support from her nearby siblings, particularly Eric, 'the stalwart' of the family. She has become closer to her widowed sisters who she sees often. Diana feels close to Sydney who she sees regularly. Although she sees less of Dennis, Eric keeps him connected to the others. Diana places siblings above friends because they are your own flesh and blood and always there. She is proud that unlike other families, they did not split when their parents died.

Felicity Brown

Felicity is widowed and lives alone. Felicity's children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Felicity at home. Felicity has mobility problems but is otherwise in good health. Felicity was easy going and cheerful. She struggled with recall and was less articulate than her siblings. Felicity recalls an alliance of three sisters, before Diana came along. They shared toys made by their dad, mucked in together and did each other's duties when someone wanted time off. When her younger siblings were born Felicity took time off work to help her mum. Their upbringing was happy and there was never any jealousy. Once married, Felicity regularly visited her siblings who were at home. Despite less contact, she stayed interested in them. As Dennis was four months old when she left home, she is least connected to him. She feels close to Charlotte who she helped to raise and who spent a lot of time at her house. Although she has more contact with her widowed sisters, Felicity feels the same about all of her siblings. She talks collectively about their good relationships. Since becoming widows the sisters socialise more. Felicity's siblings are closer than friends, with greater attachment. Their alliance is built on sociability e.g. phoning, meeting for a cup of tea, sharing Sunday dinner, shopping and holidaying. They talk about current interests as well as reminiscing.

Liz Brown

Liz is widowed and lives alone. Her son lives nearby. Her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are important family relationships. Her siblings are important but are not nearby. I interviewed Liz over the telephone. She was well spoken, articulate, and open. Liz recalls little about growing up with her siblings, except that she was closer to Janet, who helped to raise her, and her brothers who she played with. Liz left home at eighteen to embark on a career which led to a permanent move away. When she visited, she stayed with Janet, but did not maintain much contact with the others. Liz settled hundreds of miles away with her family. The geographical distance significantly affected her sibling relationships. She has been independent of them but reconnected over the last twenty years when her older sisters retired and were subsequently widowed. Since becoming widowed herself, her sibling relationships have 'got back on track.' Despite having close friends Liz feels that siblings are special. Reminiscing is one reason for that. She feels emotionally closer to her siblings with age because being with them triggers memories. Liz concluded, "*I love my brothers and sisters very much.*" She describes the relationship as strange, that you love your siblings, although distance makes it difficult.

The Black Siblings

Evie Black

Evie is married and lives with her husband. Her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Evie by telephone. She spoke quietly, with a strong accent, talking with warmth and humour about her siblings. Evie feels a special bond with Carl. They were together for six years before Frank came along, and share War-time memories. Carl was kind and generous and still is. When the other siblings came along everyone helped. Her and Carl cared for their siblings from when they were babies, together. After she left home, her siblings helped with her children. Later, Evie recalls the sisters' children mixing to the extent that people couldn't tell who belonged to who. Evie sees her nearby siblings weekly, at the former parental home that two brothers share. The whole sibling group go on holiday, including the siblings-in-law. They are one big, happy family. Support is always there, particularly during difficult times. Evie feels increasing concern for her siblings' health as they age. She loves them equally, each in a different way. They get on because of the loving family home from the start. They find safety and security from being together. Evie concludes that she *"loves them all to bits."*

Carl Black

Carl is married and lives with his wife. His wife, children, grandchildren and siblings are important relationships. I interviewed Carl at his daughter's house. Carl was confident, friendly, and helpful. Rapport was established easily. Carl recalled his early years spent with Evie, during the War. When Frank was born, Carl and Evie cared for him between them. As the family expanded everyone did chores together and enjoyed a cup of tea and cake afterwards. They reciprocated from an early age, covering when someone needed time off. Carl enjoyed caring for younger siblings and views it as a normal part of family life. When Carl left home to marry, he lived nearby and saw his siblings regularly. They get on because their parents taught them to accept and understand differences. They felt equally loved by parents who had time for each one. Being part of a large, self-contained family is a special gain. Those who are proximate meet weekly at the former parental home, which two brothers share. The whole group holiday together. Their mother's dying wish was for them to keep together. They celebrate good times and provide support during difficult times. With age, they adjust activities so they can all be together. They are closer now because they have time for one another and feel vulnerable as other relationships are lost. Carl concludes it would be difficult to get a friendship to the same level as a sibling relationship.

Denise Black

Denise is married and lives with her spouse. Her spouse, children, grandchildren, and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Denise over the telephone. She was focused and easy to interview. Denise felt safe and secure growing up as there was always someone at home. She recalls shared hobbies, particularly walking, or watching TV. The age-gaps created a sibling alliance with her brothers closest in age. They played active outdoor games together. Denise was a child when Evie and Carl each got married and saw them regularly after they left home. She felt close to Evie who she spent a lot of time with. Carl coming home and baking with them was exciting. When Denise left home her sibling relationships changed because contact lessened. She needed to come home regularly and

remained interested in them. Their closeness is due to their fair upbringing and being 'in it together.' Denise admired her older siblings and sees Carl as a role model. She liked helping her younger siblings. Distance prevents her from seeing them as often as she would like. Once family commitments lessened with age they started going on holiday. Losing a sibling made them feel vulnerable and they needed to meet up at the former parental home. She can rely on any of her siblings, something she reciprocates. They provide safety and security.

Belinda Black

Belinda is married and lives with her husband who she cares for. Her spouse, daughters and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Belinda via telephone. Belinda was quietly spoken with a gentle manner. Belinda experienced fear and isolation when separated from her siblings during a childhood illness. Belinda recalls Christmas time with her siblings, playing out with them, going on family walks, and doing chores together. She felt comfort because she never came home to an empty house. There was no conflict and little disagreements were sorted out by their mum. They helped each other, felt safe, and got on well, despite having different ideas. Leaving home was a wrench. When she lived thirty miles away she went back every week, but now she lives further away she cannot make every gathering, so phones when the others are together and joins in. They have an annual holiday together and enjoy each other's company. Belinda is equally close to all of her siblings but has more contact with Denise. They all needed and supported each other following the loss of their parents and brothers. They are her friends who she would go to first. Belinda describes their stability as unusual, noting that their long-term marriages mean the extended family group is also stable. Belinda "*loves them all to bits.*"

Frank Black

Frank is married and lives with his wife. Frank's children, grandchildren and siblings are important family members. I interviewed Frank by telephone. I found him easy to talk to, as he was warm and engaging. Frank has grown up feeling part of a family. He describes togetherness and sharing emotions, food, possessions, household, and caring duties. He was close to Carl and Evie who went through the war and suffered hardships that the others did not. Frank found seeing the younger ones come along exciting. He had a safe and secure childhood. Marriage was the reason they moved out and separated. As his older siblings left home, Frank focused on his younger siblings. Once Frank married he visited everyone on a Saturday. His brothers live in the former parental home which is a focal point. Because they always meet up regularly their relationships seem constant. They get on because their parents encouraged them to share and be tolerant. When he was ill his siblings were supportive. Siblings are more important than friends and his have always been his friends. He gets strength and comfort from them. Their annual gatherings keep them close. He has a good relationship with all of them, has always felt positive and comfortable with them, and cannot understand the turmoil that happens in other families.

Alison Black

Alison Black is married and lives with her husband. Her husband, children, grandchildren, and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Alison via telephone. Alison was well spoken, and fairly shy in nature. Alison did not grow up with all of her siblings,

experiencing her older married siblings as visitors and recalling only three brothers at home. When her twin brother died the others compensated by giving her a lot of attention. When Alison married and left home regular contact continued. The family home where her two brothers live is their meeting place. They needed to come together when their brothers and parents died. If she needed support she could just turn up on anyone's doorstep. Alison has known her older siblings as couples and known her in-laws all of her life. She feels closer to her siblings with age due to vulnerability arising when they lost their brother. Now her family have grown up, she has time for her siblings. During their annual holiday, fourteen of them, including spouses, go away. They adapt well to the mixed abilities that come with age feeling able to opt in and out of activities. They are happy and enjoy each other's company.

The Coal Siblings

Hilary Coal

Hilary Coal is married and lives with her husband. She identified her husband, children, brother and cousins as important family relationships. I interviewed Hilary by phone. Hilary was well spoken with a calm, fluent manner. Hilary recalls her and Liam's first ten years at home with fondness. They spent time outdoors playing together. She was the bossy older sister and he the quieter younger brother. They separated when she started school, but he joined her two years later. She escorted him to and from school and reluctantly to parties. Once at different boarding schools they spent the holidays together on the beach or at the cinema. There were minor "normal brother sister" tensions but no conflict. During term time Hilary wrote to Liam. On leaving school, Hilary went to University and Liam undertook an apprenticeship. Hilary maintained an interest in what Liam was doing and they were geographically close. Hilary met her husband at University who got on well with Liam. Hilary and her husband moved to the South of England. Liam and his wife remained in the Midlands. There has been little face-to-face contact. Hilary and her husband visit Liam in passing sometimes, but he rarely visits them. Liam is supportive when needed, such as when their father died, and when they organised their mother's care, but is not family-oriented. Hilary feels that early separation and subsequent geographical distance makes their relationship unique.

Liam Coal

Liam Coal is married and lives with his wife. Liam identified his wife and children as important family relationships. I interviewed Liam at his home. Liam was smartly dressed, quietly spoken and a little reserved. Liam's first memory of Hilary was during the war in an air raid shelter with their parents. Being separated from his family at boarding school was difficult but, once settled, coming home was equally difficult. Although there was no contact between him and Hilary during term time, they enjoyed the holidays spent just with each other. When Hilary was at University, Liam was nearby, doing his apprenticeship. He visited her once or twice. When they met, the time gap disappeared. Since marrying and having children, contact has been sporadic. Liam recalls meeting when visiting their mother at Easter. Liam's upbringing spent apart from family made him independent, and he has a very comfortable distant relationship with Hilary, and she drops in with her husband on their way to visit other relatives. Liam was grateful when Hilary supported their widowed mother, taking the responsibility off his shoulders. He feels Hilary has not needed his support, having become self-reliant at boarding school. Liam believes that friendships are more important than sibling relationships which may go wrong under pressure. He concluded that his warm yet distant relationship with Hilary should last for ever.

The Green Siblings

Anthea Green

Anthea is widowed and lives alone. Her important family relationships are her sister, sons and nephews. I interviewed Anthea in her own home. Anthea was a natural talker who it was a pleasure to interview. The twelve months when Anthea was hospitalised and separated from Carolyn, affected their childhood relationship. Anthea returned from convalescence a semi-invalid and her life was restricted. She watched her active sister perform in swimming galas and felt proud, yet jealous. During their school years, Anthea felt rejected by Carolyn who did not want her around. From their teenage years, they developed a close, intimate relationship. On leaving school they worked and travelled to work together. They married in their late teens and were each other's bridesmaids. The sisters' closest time was spent raising their boys together. When Carolyn and her husband relocated it was a huge wrench. Anthea feared they might drift apart, but they didn't. She described two episodes of significant long-term conflict which was distressing but overcome. Anthea and Carolyn provide support through difficult times, such as when their parents died. Anthea received loving support when her husband died. The sisters have drawn closer with age and confide deeply. Anthea's worse thought is losing Carolyn. The sibling relationship is stronger than a friendship. Carolyn always tells her the truth, and an older sister replaces a mother's trust. The sisters phone each other weekly and text when anything is going on.

Carolyn Green

Carolyn is married and lives with her husband. Her important family relationships are her husband, sons, sister and nephews. I interviewed Carolyn by telephone. Carolyn, who described herself as a listener, was concerned about having nothing to say. I found her open and pleasant to interview. Carolyn shows empathy about Anthea's childhood illness. Anthea suffered and it coloured their childhood. Their greater relationship has been since their teenage years when they became friends as well as sisters. Although they had different interests they went out together and confided in each other. On leaving school they worked together and got the bus home. They felt blessed. Having grown into 'self' they were strong enough to blend. Then they married and Anthea's husband was a lovely, exceptional man. The four of them went out together to dances. They were particularly close when raising their children. Carolyn recalls an episode of major conflict. She felt so hurt at the time, but it has been forgiven and they have moved on. They have different characters. Anthea is a good visitor and talker, Carolyn is the listener. Anthea rings every Sunday night and Carolyn listens to what is going on in Anthea's life. She is disappointed if Anthea doesn't ring. Despite moving away, her relationship with Anthea remained important and there are things that Carolyn only tells Anthea. She likens the sister relationship to the mother-daughter relationship. They are anchors for each other and no-one else can share on the deep level that they do. The relationship has changed but remains very special. Losing Anthea would be a major loss.

The Grey Siblings

Robert Grey

Robert is married and lives with his wife. His two children and their spouses, his step daughter, his grandchildren, Adrian, and his late brother Thomas' family, are important family relationships. I interviewed Robert via telephone. Robert was articulate and engaging, but not always fluent. Robert recalled a childhood spent enjoying outdoor sporting activities with his brothers. He differentiated between them, recalling rivalry with his late brother Thomas, but none with Adrian. He admired Adrian's morality, personality and physical courage. The brothers could take on anything together. Robert conveys a strong sense of sibling solidarity. Robert describes Adrian as open, positive, enthusiastic, driven, and easy to get along with. He recalls the relationship meaning less during his University years when he developed different interests and gave up the Christian faith. Once he married he felt closer to Adrian again because a strong couples' relationship developed. The death of Adrian's first wife brought them closer still as Robert and his wife supported Adrian. He spent time with Adrian doing the activities they had enjoyed earlier in life. Since Adrian re-married, contact has reduced. Robert feels less needed and Adrian has become more religious since he re-married, which is the one area that is divisive. In fact, steering clear of religion avoids disagreements. His relationship with Adrian is very important and Robert concludes that Adrian "*means a great deal to me and I to him.*"

Adrian Grey

Adrian has been married twice and lives with his second wife. Robert, his son and daughter-in-law, grandchildren, and his late wife's sister and her children, are important family relationships. I interviewed Adrian by telephone. Adrian had a clear, strong voice and was fluent, articulate, and up-beat. Adrian felt blessed to have strong sibling relationships during their earlier years. He is proud that their similar physical abilities meant they made an impact when they turned up to activities together. They were the brothers that everyone knew. Losing their mother coincided with him leaving home and had a shaping effect on their relationships. He returned at weekends to be with his brothers and support their father. Leaving home marked the start of them going their own ways. Adrian married first and emigrated to Canada. He returned for their late brother Thomas's wedding. It felt good to be back with his brothers. Adrian attributed his good sibling relationship with Robert to God's will but emphasised their common interests and characteristics. Two related events signify the importance of his relationship with Robert. When Adrian's first wife died, Robert provided emotional support, empathy, practical support, and encouragement. Robert was encouraging when he remarried. His relationship with Robert is "*pretty strong.*" Contact is less, because Robert is busy with grandchildren. He and Robert have "*never been out of our comfort zone.*" He is blessed to have a stable, secure sibling relationship. Despite opposing faiths, they remain close.

The Peacock siblings

Len Peacock

Len is twice divorced but has spent most of his life as a single parent. His daughter lives with him. Len's face-to-face interview took place in an office at his request. Len is an intelligent helpful person, who was easy to interview. Len felt resentful towards his strict father who treated him differently to his sisters, but not towards them. He recalled playing in the woods, sledging in the winter and going on family holidays with them. They had happy well-balanced sibling relationships. Once working they socialised with friends but travelled to work together and ate meals together. Len left home first, when he married. After their father died, Len became a single parent and his sisters emigrated so his mother helped raise his children and there was reciprocal support between them. Contact with his sisters has been constant, via phone calls and letters initially. Len and his mother would contact them together. Phone calls are still regular, but his sisters have not visited since their mum died. He has flown over to see them. There was conflict after their mother died. They made up and it is the only time Len has been upset with them. Len would call on long-term friends for support because the geographical distance prevents his sisters from fulfilling that role. Siblings and friends are equally supportive. Len has always felt close to his sisters something which emigration, marriage, divorce, or widowhood has not changed.

Edith Peacock

Edith is married and lives abroad with her husband. Her spouse, children, and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Edith over the telephone. Edith was quiet and needed encouragement to elaborate rather than give brief answers. Edith spent more time with Harriet than Len growing up. She recalls outdoor imaginative games with Harriet and a strong sense of sisterhood. They had a rural upbringing and walked everywhere. Her and Harriet went horse riding together. Their upbringing was family-oriented with close connections to her mother's family. Starting work made no difference to their relationships as they all lived at home. They drifted apart when they started dating. She became less close to Len during this period. He married and left home first. When Harriet married and emigrated, Edith who went over for the wedding, met her future husband and emigrated too. As her father had died it was a difficult decision. Feeling homesick becomes more difficult with age. Her and Harriet have kept close emotionally and she sees her most days. She has become closer to Len. They rekindled their relationship during his last visit. The one conflict with Len, after their mother died, was quickly resolved. Support between her and Harriet is reciprocal and available. She would ring Len if she needed emotional support. Siblings are important and are like good friends. Edith is happy with her siblings and loves them to bits.

Harriet Peacock

Harriet is widowed and lives alone. Her important family relationships are her children, Edith and family, and Len. I interviewed Harriet by phone. She was quiet but opened up as the interview progressed. Harriet remembers playing in woods and fields with her siblings. They walked or biked to and from places together, spent time with their mother's siblings, and were together at the village school. Harriet felt equally close to both siblings and describes good relationships. There was daily contact during their working years when they lived at home. Then Len started working away. Harriet emigrated to get married. Edith married and emigrated with her. She is homesick and often reminisces with Edith about home. The sisters confide about their regrets and wish that they had come home. They contacted their mum and Len by writing initially. Now it is easier to telephone. Harriet recalls conflict after

her mum died which was resolved. Edith has supported her, especially this last year, and support is reciprocal. The geographical distance makes it hard to share support with Len. She is sorry that Len is on his own, but takes comfort that his daughter is there. She finds Edith easier to get on with, but is immensely proud of Len. She feels closer to her siblings because you grow up and realise that family are the most important people in your life. Siblings can be especially close friends. She has that type of siblingship with Edith.

The Reed siblings

Rebecca Reed

Rebecca is divorced and lives alone. Her son and brothers are important family relationships. I interviewed Rebecca at home. She is energetic, enthusiastic, analytical, easy to establish rapport with, and a delight to interview. Age differences led to a lack of shared experience growing up. David was working at fifteen as she was starting school. He met his future wife when Rebecca was seven, and had married and left home by the time she was twelve. There was shared experience with Ralph who protected and stood up for her sometimes. Their father died when Rebecca was fifteen, and she married at seventeen and started a family. Although they met at their mum's house every Sunday, they went separate ways when she died. Contact was rare during their working years. As neither brother had children they all lacked that common ground. Rebecca views David as strong in his opinions so they clash sometimes. Ralph is gentler so fallouts are rare. Both brothers have supported her. Although they have not needed support from her, she would willingly give it. Since her and David are on their own and live closer they see each other frequently. She is closer to David now than she has ever been. She is not good at keeping in touch with Ralph despite feeling emotionally close to him. Because of the age gap and different attitudes towards gender, they developed independently, something their mother encouraged. As Rebecca has no sisters, female friendships are important too.

David Reed

David is widowed and lives alone. His siblings, cousins and nephew are his only family. I interviewed David at home. David is an active, intelligent man, who was straightforward, with a dry sense of humour. The large age gaps meant that David had little in common with his siblings who had different interests and friends. As his parents had close connections to their siblings, there were family gatherings. As David worked for his parents while his siblings were schoolchildren, there was a cultural gap. After David married he visited his siblings at the parental home. When his dad died, his mum and siblings moved and contact reduced. There have been conflicts over the years, but they have always been resolved. When Rebecca went abroad there was a loss of contact. On her return, he worked on her house. Recently, contact and closeness between them has increased. They meet weekly for a meal and share an interest in theatre. David has not needed support and the age gap does not lend itself to being supported by younger siblings. When his wife died, Ralph persuaded David to go back with him for a holiday. He and Ralph bought a holiday apartment which they rent out. He goes there regularly now. If Ralph needed support he would be there. David feels siblings can be friends, but friendships and cousins can be important. Despite the age gap he would not have wanted to be an only child.

Ralph Reed

Ralph is married and lives abroad with his wife. His important family relationships are his wife, siblings and nephew. I interviewed Ralph on the phone. Ralph was engaging and easy going, with a kindly voice and manner. Due to the age gap with David and gender difference with Rebecca, Ralph spent little time with them growing up and had different friends. Ralph recalls family outings and strong connections to his parents' siblings. Ralph was at school when David married and moved out. David and his wife visited at weekends. Rebecca left home to get married and have her first child. Although she lived nearby initially, her situation became complicated when her partners changed. Ralph got on very well with Rebecca's first husband. He was disappointed when they divorced, and his nephew Aiden came to live with him for a while. Ralph recalls a few conflicts with his siblings that are resolved. After their mother died, Ralph hardly saw David. When David's wife died, he tried to support by being there. Ralph is proud of how resilient David was. David has never needed his support, but Rebecca has, although all three of them are independent. He reconnected with David after David lost his wife. They bought a holiday apartment together and David visits every year. All three of them are closer, more tolerant and appreciative as part of a getting older process, having more time on retirement and understanding and relating to them more.

The Scarlett Siblings

Jack Scarlett

Jack is married and lives with his wife who he cares for. Jack's wife, children and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Jack via telephone. Jack is a strong person, yet is not afraid to be open about his vulnerabilities and regrets. Jack had little to do with his siblings growing up. He detached himself from their problematic upbringing which led to all four of them leaving home as soon as they could. His younger siblings seemed trapped in the situation. Jack led a different life to his same age sibling. He went to grammar school while she brought up their younger siblings. The large age gap between himself and his younger siblings made them "*separated in time*." Jack graduated, married and emigrated on the same day. Jack feels responsible for the lack of connection with his siblings. With age, he feels fonder of Sharon, came to admire Henry, and developed genuine love and affection for Karen who is a true, supportive friend. Karen metaphorically held his hand through several crisis situations. Siblings are irreplaceable and different to friendships, although they may perform the same functions. The shared heritage and history make sibling relationships important. Jack attributes his feelings of closeness to being less selfish. With greater availability of time he regrets the past and feels more interested and tolerant.

Henry Scarlett

Henry is married and lives with his wife. I interviewed Henry via Skype. Henry was articulate, intelligent and humorous. He was analytical and measured in his answers, and on occasion a little defensive. However, at times he was extremely open about difficult past events. Henry explained that they experienced downward social mobility and stigmatism growing up. Because of the age gaps, the two sets of siblings were affected differently. He and Karen experienced the aftermath of their mother's breakdown and their father not having regular work. His relationship with Karen has been up and down. Although past conflict has dissipated, he would probably withdraw if tensions arose. Jack was absent from home and then emigrated. Henry has enjoyed spending time with Jack alone, drinking and talking, and finds that Jack is interesting and has become sentimental with age. Henry feels affection, concern, sympathy, and frustration towards Sharon who supported their mother to the detriment of her education, cared for her younger siblings, did household duties and farm

labouring work. He admits Sharon's late husband was difficult to get along with which created tension. His sibling relationships really only formed once their parents died. Henry does not associate support with his siblings, having been independent of his family since the age of fifteen. He feels closer to his siblings now and concludes that sibling relationships are as important as you make them.

Sharon Scarlett

Sharon is widowed and lives alone. Her siblings and their children are important relationships. Sharon had found it hard to overcome some of the problems created by her upbringing. Sharon talked rapidly and sometimes vented frustrations over past misunderstandings. Their parents' expectations meant that Sharon was responsible for her younger siblings. She took them out and created adventures for them. They provided companionship yet her role restricted her ability to make friends. Her and Jack had different opportunities so there was little shared experience. She did not get to know Jack before he emigrated. Sharon emigrated herself a few years after he did. Sharon admires Karen's good qualities but their relationship has changed. They feel affectionate when apart, but tensions due to the relationship between her late husband and her siblings have not completely resolved. Sharon feels love for Karen. Visits between her and Jack have been sporadic. Jack's positive character traits of kindness, generosity, straightforwardness and honesty, have come to the fore with age. She feels affection, empathy and helplessness, because Jack has nursed his wife all of his retired years. Sharon has always felt closer to Henry, but worries that Jack and Karen might reject her, despite feeling that Jack has been a good older brother and she is okay with Karen. She concludes that she is fond of all of them.

Karen Scarlett

Karen is divorced and lives alone. Her important family relationships are her children, grandchildren and siblings. I interviewed Karen by telephone. Karen was well spoken, calm and thoughtful. Karen's childhood memories of her siblings are not good. She experienced Jack as a detached older sibling who was in the Army when she was eight, then at University, and emigrated when she was thirteen. Sharon was responsible for her and Henry, but favoured Henry. However, her and Sharon became close during her teenage years. Sharon emigrating was a wrench. Karen did things with Henry because they were close in age. There was conflict although she was fond of him. Once they went to different schools they became distant. After Jack emigrated there was little contact until he worked in Europe. Once the age gap seemed insignificant their relationship developed. Jack is supportive, kind, loving, and interested. She wishes she could see him more. She supported him through a difficult time and shows empathy and concern for him. Contact with Henry is intermittent but increased when she divorced. Her and Henry have been closer since he comforted her at their mother's wake. Her and Sharon have always written regularly. Recently there was tension because of Sharon's late husband. Her relationship with Sharon is warm and friendly as long as they don't try to go too deep. Karen gets comfort from having siblings. Despite their upbringing, she loves them and feels loved by them. They are important relationships.

The Silver Siblings

Gareth Silver

Gareth is married and lives with his wife. His wife, brother, children, nieces, nephews and cousins are important family relationships. I interviewed Gareth over the telephone. He was well spoken and articulate, with a quiet manner. There is a twelve-year age gap between Gareth and Richard because their parents separated for a while. Richard's arrival was welcomed and anticipated although the age-gap meant that they were at different stages. Gareth felt great fondness towards his little brother. He taught Richard to read before he started school and was proud of him. Major changes occurred in their relationship when their parents' marriage broke up. Gareth was at University when their father took Richard and prevented Gareth and their mother from seeing him for twelve years. When they reconnected Richard, who was eighteen, went to live with their mother in London. Regular visiting and contact between Richard and Gareth was established. Gareth had been married for some time and had children by then. After Richard married, he eventually moved away. He now lives further away with his second wife. The brothers meet about twice a year and keep in contact via e-mail and phone. Being married and having children brought them closer. Their relationship has been consistently close. Support exchange, such as advice about parenting and sharing knowledge about computers, occurs. They pulled together to support their mother in later life. Richard would always be a supportive relationship. Family is important to Gareth and he is very proud of Richard.

Richard Silver

Richard is married and lives with his second wife. His wife, brother and children, are important family relationships. I interviewed Richard over the telephone. Richard was well spoken, articulate, up-beat and engaging, and the interview flowed naturally. Richard wonders if his memories, prior to the separation, are composite memories formed later. Gareth taught him things. He recalls togetherness, admiration and interest. Gareth protected his mother from his father. During the separation, Richard remembers his father trying to turn him against his mother and Gareth, which he did not accept. Richard described their reconnection with excitement. He moved to London to live with his mother and joined in her routine of visiting Gareth and his family. Richard was connecting with his mother, Gareth and Gareth's family simultaneously. When they reconnected, the age-gap seemed insignificant. They got on well and, at eighteen, he accepted thirty-year-old Gareth's views without question. Now he can challenge his brother's viewpoint he feels closer. There is mutual appreciation of each other's skills. The relationship is important to him. If Gareth died it would leave a gap in his life. Gareth is there if needed. Gareth was supportive and non-judgemental when Richard's marriage ended. He confides in Gareth when worried about his children and values his advice. Richard values little things that make having a brother special, like enjoying choosing his Christmas present.

The White siblings

Anita White

Anita is divorced and lives alone. Her children and siblings are important family relationships. I interviewed Anita via Skype. Anita is articulate and intelligent, insightful and analytical. To Anita, her and Anthony were a family in their own right, living abroad with their parents while their elder sisters attended boarding schools. Anthony was gregarious and did boyish things with his friends. She led more of a solitary life. Her sisters came home for the holidays and brightened the place up with their singing. Anita and Anthony's early shared experience made them close. Closeness to her sisters came later. She is proud of her family and engaged with them, even when apart. During adulthood, geographical and circumstantial changes altered the relationship dynamics. During her University years, Anita felt closer to Doris, and their husbands got on well. She reconnected with her other siblings once divorced. Re-marriage and parenthood brought her even closer to her sisters. Support has been constant, but she needed more during the years that she was their mother's carer. The age-gap means that support is not something she associates with her sisters, and Anthony was abroad and inaccessible during their working lives. Anthony's wife is an important family member who is there for everyone. Anita observes the ageing process through her sisters and shares concern for them with Anthony. She is interested and engaged with her siblings, and interested in the past, having inherited family correspondence.

Anthony White

Anthony is married and lives with his wife. His wife, children, grandchildren, siblings, niece and great-niece, are important family relationships. I interviewed Anthony via Skype. Anthony was lively, intelligent, articulate, enthusiastic and energetic. When Anthony lived abroad with Anita and their parents, he experienced Anita as his "real" sister, and his older sisters as fascinating adults who visited during the holidays. He recalls being with Anita at school, and them supporting each other to learn a new language. He recalls hanging around with Anita and engaging in active outdoor play with a male friend. Once Anthony and Anita went to boarding school contact reduced, except during holidays at their parents' house. Differences arose based on age/gender and being at different stages. Anita was going out to pubs and socialising, while he was still "baby brother." During his University years, Anthony met his wife and the relationship between his wife and his sisters became important. His sibling relationships have responded to circumstantial and geographical changes. All of his sisters have been divorced, which resulted in moves. Anthony sees more of Elizabeth following her latest move and feels closer to her now. He feels concern for his older sisters. His role has changed and he now gives advice and guidance. Compared to other families, they are remarkably close. Anthony notes that sibling relationships are important by virtue of their longevity, shared connection and time, shared life together, and that sense of belonging and being part of his life.

Doris White

Doris is divorced and lives alone. Her children, grandchildren and siblings, are important family relationships. I interviewed Doris over the telephone. Doris was well spoken, intelligent and articulate. Humour came through, yet also a sense that she feels alone. Doris's early memories were unhappy. She felt neglected by her mother and separated from her siblings at boarding school. Her younger siblings were "a ray of sunshine in all our lives"

and stayed with her sometimes once she was an adult. When Doris pursued her career, Elizabeth and her husband were 'home for me.' After she married, the married couples shared the house and their sons grew up together. Inequity in wealth led to Doris and her husband moving and then having greater contact with Anita, Anthony and their spouses. However, once her younger siblings and their spouses moved away, contact lessened. When she re-married, Elizabeth moved nearer to Doris, so they met up frequently. However, Elizabeth moved nearer to her children and grandchildren. Doris felt that her siblings were not supportive when her marriage broke up as attention was focused on their just widowed mother. Currently, Doris feels separated from them. Although they invite her to stay she is unable to travel. Considering the relationship over a lifetime, she talks about loving and liking them and their importance. Elizabeth has been her closest sibling throughout life and they are a lot more loving than many sibling groups.

Elizabeth White

Elizabeth has been married and divorced several times and lives alone. Her children, grandchildren, siblings and nieces and nephews, are important family relationships. I interviewed Elizabeth by phone. Elizabeth was well spoken, fluent and an engaging speaker. Elizabeth always found her relationship with her sister Doris an easier, more compatible relationship than her relationship with her late twin, Annabelle. She recalls shared interests with Doris, particularly music. She felt supportive towards Doris when they were at boarding school. After Anita and Anthony were born she felt a togetherness. Once she and Doris were adults and lived in London, she felt that they belonged together. However, once Doris moved North with her husband, Anita went to University, and Anthony moved away, only Annabelle was proximate. All of her siblings were supportive following her divorce, particularly Doris. When she re-married and moved North, she saw more of Doris who she has always remained connected to, and feels love and gratitude towards based on their life-time relationship. However, she feels guilt, because she finds it harder to connect with Doris who is increasingly introspective. Her younger siblings have become increasingly important. Geographical proximity makes a difference. She has hardly seen Doris since moving South again, but often stays with Anthony and his wife Rachel. She concludes that she is very much part of the family and feels tremendous love for everyone.